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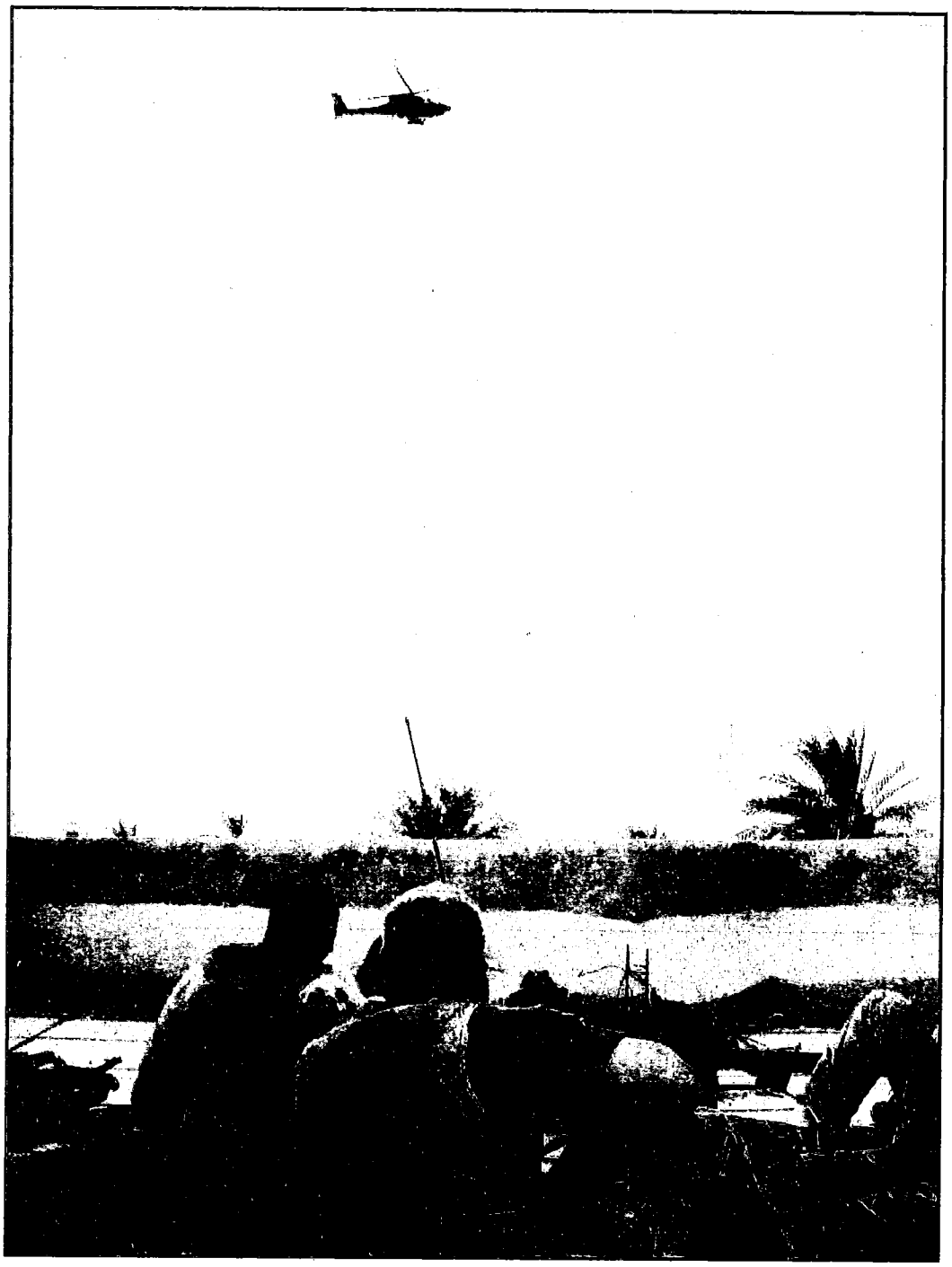
EXTREME OWNERSHIP

HOW U.S. NAVY SEALS LEAD AND WIN

JOCKO WILLINK AND LEIF BABIN

EXTREME
OWNERSHIP



Dawn breaks over South-Central Ramadi. Task Unit Bruiser, Charlie Platoon sniper overwatch deep into enemy territory with AH-64 Apache gunship overhead. Enemy fighters shot thousands of rounds at the helicopter as they overflew the city.
(Photo courtesy of the authors)

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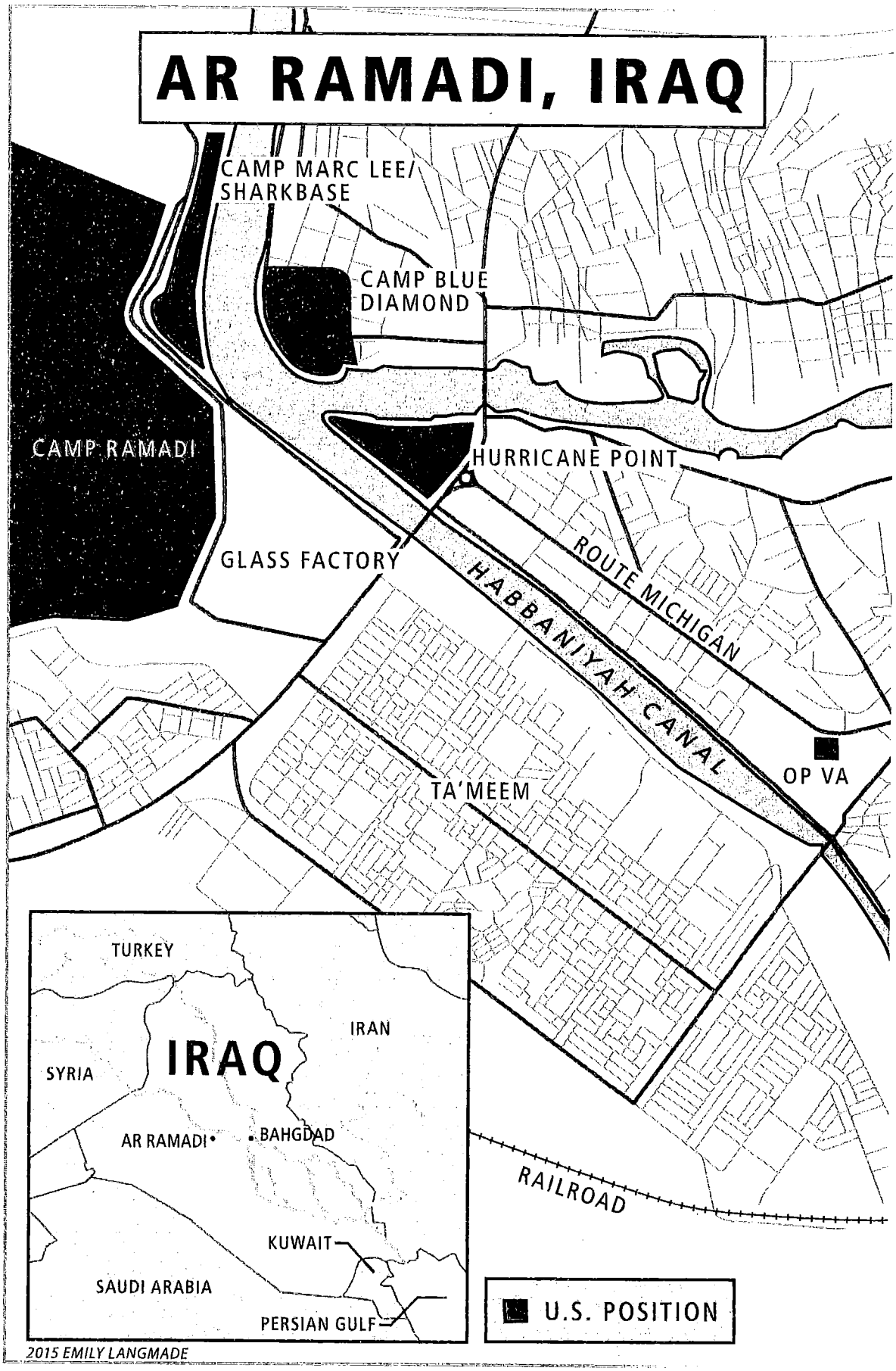
Dedicated to Marc Lee, Mike Monsoor, and Ryan Job
—three courageous warriors, SEAL teammates, and friends—
who valiantly wielded their big machine guns on the mean streets of
Ramadi and laid down their lives so that others might live.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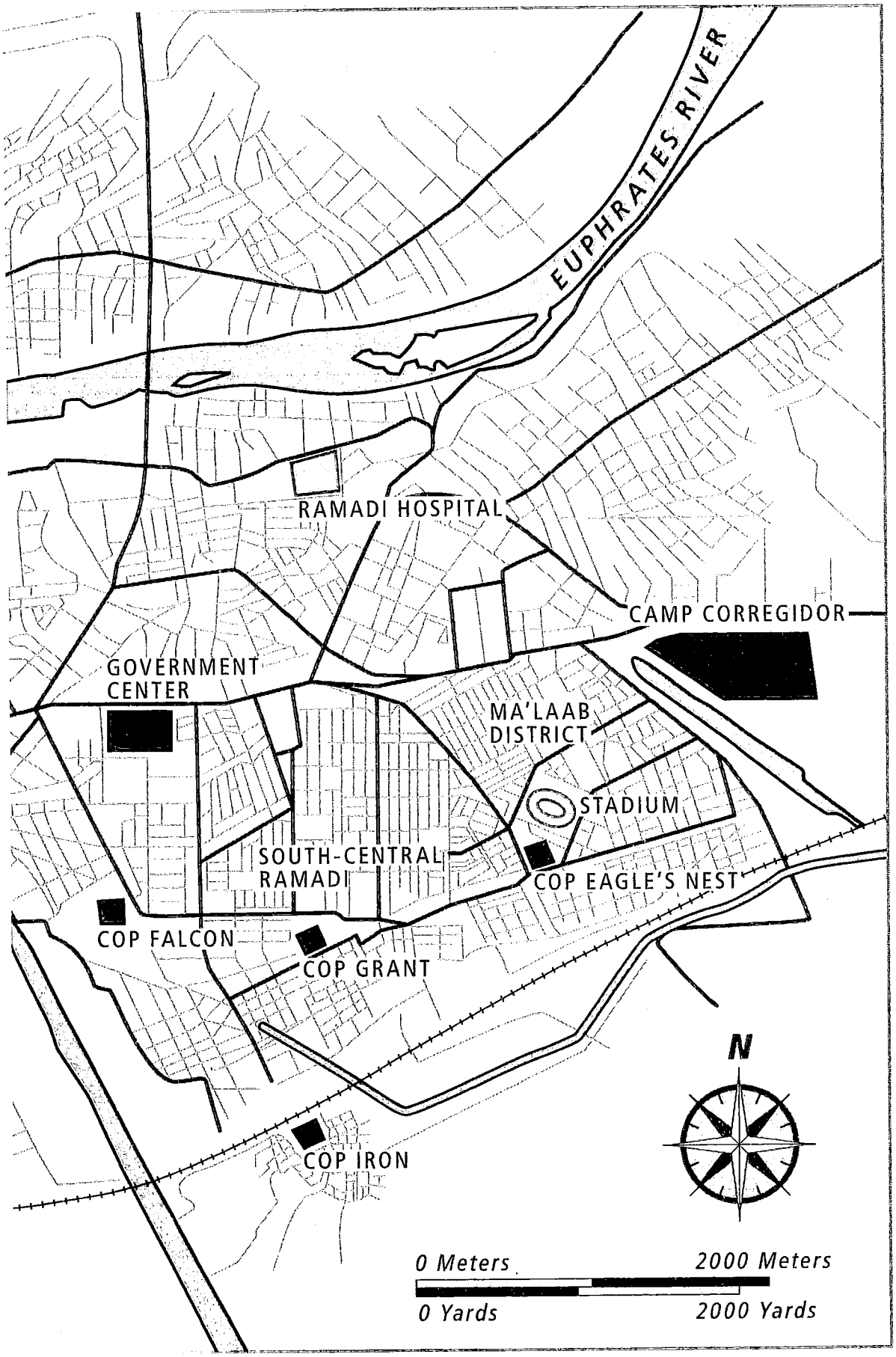
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PREFACE

"So, there I was. . . ."

Plenty of glorified war stories start like that. In the SEAL Teams, we make fun of those who tell embellished tales about themselves. A typical war story told in jest about something a SEAL did usually begins like this: "So, no shit, there I was, knee-deep in grenade pins. . . ."

This book isn't meant to be an individual's glorified war story. As SEALs, we operate as a team of high-caliber, multitalented individuals who have been through perhaps the toughest military training and most rigorous screening process anywhere. But in the SEAL program, it is all about *the Team.* The sum is far greater than the parts. We refer to our professional warfare community simply as "the Teams." We call ourselves "team guys." This book describes SEAL combat operations and training through our eyes—from our individual perspectives—and applies our experience to leadership and management practices in the business world.

Yet, our SEAL operations were not about us as individuals;

our stories are of the SEAL platoon and task unit we were lucky enough to lead. Chris Kyle, the SEAL sniper and author of the best seller *American Sniper,* which inspired the movie, was one member of that platoon and task unit—Charlie Platoon's lead sniper and point man in Task Unit Bruiser. He played a part in the combat examples in this book, as did a host of other teammates who, though deserving of recognition, remain out of the spotlight. Far from being ours alone, the war stories in this book are of the brothers and leaders we served with and fought alongside—the Team. The combat scenarios describe how we confronted obstacles as a team and overcame those challenges together. After all, there can be no leadership where there is no team.

Between the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terrorism, the U.S. military experienced a thirty-year span of virtually no sustained combat operations. With the exception of a few flashes of conflict (Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, Somalia), only a handful of U.S. military leaders had any real, substantial combat experience. In the SEAL Teams, these were the "dry years." As those who served in heavy combat situations in the jungles of Vietnam retired, their combat leadership lessons faded.

All that changed on September 11, 2001, when the horrific terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland launched America once again into sustained conflict. More than a decade of continuous war and tough combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan gave birth to a new generation of leaders in the ranks of America's fighting forces. These leaders were forged not in classrooms through hypothetical training and theory, but through practical, hands-on experience on the front lines of war—the front echelon.* Leadership theories were tested in combat; hypotheses put through trials of

* Based on our leadership lessons learned from the front echelon on the battlefield, we named our company Echelon Front, LLC.

fire. Across the ranks of the U.S. military services, forgotten wartime lessons were rewritten—in blood. Some leadership principles developed in training proved ineffective in actual combat. Thus, effective leadership skills were honed while those that proved impractical were discarded, spawning a new generation of combat leaders from across the broad ranks of all U.S. military services—Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force—and those of our allies. The U.S. Navy SEAL Teams were at the forefront of this leadership transformation, emerging from the triumphs and tragedies of war with a crystallized understanding of what it takes to succeed in the most challenging environments that combat presents.

Among this new generation of combat leaders there are many war stories. After years of successful operations, including the heroic raid that killed Osama bin Laden, U.S. Navy SEALs have piqued the public's interest and received more attention than most of us ever wanted. This spotlight has shed light on aspects of our organization that should remain secret. In this book, we are careful not to remove that shroud any further. We do not discuss classified programs or violate nondisclosure agreements surrounding our operational experiences.

Many SEAL memoirs have been written—some by experienced and well-respected operators who wanted to pass on the heroic deeds and accomplishments of our tribe; a few, unfortunately, by SEALs who hadn't contributed much to the community. Like so many of our SEAL teammates, we had a negative view when SEAL books were published.

Why then would we choose to write a book? As battlefield leaders, we learned extremely valuable lessons through success and failure. We made mistakes and learned from them, discovering what works and what doesn't. We trained SEAL leaders and watched them implement the principles we ourselves had learned with the same success on difficult battlefields. Then, as we worked with

businesses in the civilian sector, we again saw the leadership principles we followed in combat lead to victory for the companies and executives we trained. Many people, both in the SEAL Teams and in the businesses we worked with, asked us to document our lessons learned in a concrete way that leaders could reference.

We wrote this book to capture those leadership principles for future generations, so that they may not be forgotten, so that as new wars begin and end, such crucial lessons will not have to be relearned—rewritten in more blood. We wrote this so that the leadership lessons can continue to impact teams beyond the battlefield in all leadership situations—any company, team, or organization in which a group of people strives to achieve a goal and accomplish a mission. We wrote this book for leaders everywhere to utilize the principles we learned to lead and win.

Who are we to write such a book? It may seem that anyone who believes they can write a book on leadership must think themselves the epitome of what every leader should aspire to be. But we are far from perfect. We continue to learn and grow as leaders every day, just as any leaders who are truly honest with themselves must. We were simply fortunate enough to experience an array of leadership challenges that taught us valuable lessons. This book is our best effort to pass those lessons on, not from a pedestal or a position of superiority, but from a humble place, where the scars of our failings still show.

We are Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, SEAL officers who served together in Ar Ramadi, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. There, we became intimately familiar with the humbling trials of war. We were lucky enough to build, train, and lead high-performance, winning teams that proved exceptionally effective. We saw firsthand the perils of complacency, having served on a battlefield where at any time the possibility of our position being overrun by a large force of well-armed enemy fighters was quite real. We know what it means to fail—to lose, to be surprised, out-

maneuvered, or simply beaten. Those lessons were the hardest, but perhaps the most important. We learned that leadership requires belief in the mission and unyielding perseverance to achieve victory, particularly when doubters question whether victory is even possible. As SEAL leaders, we developed, tested, confirmed, and captured an array of leadership lessons as well as management and organizational best practices. We then built and ran SEAL leadership training and helped write the doctrine for the next generation of SEAL leaders.

Our SEAL task unit served through the bulk of what has become known as the "Battle of Ramadi." But this book is not intended as a historical account of those combat operations. In a concise volume such as this, we cannot possibly tell the stories of service and sacrifice by the U.S. military men and women who served, fought, bled, and died there. We—the authors and the SEALs we served with in Ramadi—were tremendously humbled by the courage, dedication, professionalism, selflessness, and sacrifice displayed by the units we served with under both the U.S. Army 2nd Brigade, 28th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, and the U.S. Army 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division—the Ready First Brigade Combat Team. These included a distinguished list of courageous and storied units, both U.S. Army and Marine Corps. It would require an entire book (or series of books) to detail their heroism and unfaltering dedication to the mission and our country. God bless them all.

Inside that Band of Brothers carrying out the broader fight for Ramadi was our SEAL task unit: Naval Special Warfare Task Unit Bruiser. Again, the combat experiences relayed in the following chapters are not meant for historic reference. Although we have used quotes to impart the message of conversations we had, they are certainly not perfect, and are subject to the passage of time, the constraints of this format, and the shortfalls of memory. Our SEAL combat experiences depicted in this book have been carefully

edited or altered to conceal specific tactics, techniques, and procedures, and to guard classified information about when and where specific operations took place and who participated in them. The manuscript was submitted and approved through the Pentagon's Security Review process in accordance with U.S. Department of Defense requirements. We have done our utmost to protect the identities of our brothers in the SEAL Teams with whom we served and for those still serving in harm's way. They are silent professionals and seek no recognition. We take this solemn responsibility to protect them with the utmost seriousness.

We took the same precaution with the rest of the warriors in the Ready First Brigade Combat Team. We have used, almost entirely, rank alone to identify these brave Soldiers and Marines.* This is by no means meant to detract from their service, but only to ensure their privacy and security.

Likewise, we have done our utmost to protect the clients of our leadership and management consulting company, Echelon Front, LLC. We have refrained from using company names, changed the names of individuals, masked industry-specific information, and in some cases altered the positions of executives and industries to protect the identities of people and companies. Their confidentiality is sacrosanct. While the stories of our lessons learned in the business world are based directly on our real experiences, in some cases we combined situations, condensed timelines, and modified story lines to more clearly emphasize the principles we are trying to illustrate.

The idea for this book was born from the realization that the principles critical to SEAL success on the battlefield—how SEALs train and prepare their leaders, how they mold and develop high-performance teams, and how they lead in combat—are directly

* In accordance with U.S. Department of Defense policy, the term "Soldier" will be capitalized for "U.S. Soldier" throughout this book, as will "Marine" for "U.S. Marine."

applicable to success in any group, organization, corporation, business, and, to a broader degree, life. This book provides the reader with our formula for success: the mind-set and guiding principles that enable SEAL leaders and combat units to achieve extraordinary results. It demonstrates how to apply these directly in business and life to likewise achieve victory.

Task Unit Bruiser SEALs unleash lethal machine gun fire and 40mm grenades on insurgents during a clearance operation in southeast Ramadi.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

INTRODUCTION

Ramadi, Iraq: The Combat Leader's Dilemma

Leif Babin

Only the low rumble of diesel engines could be heard as the convoy of Humvees* eased to a stop along the canal road. Iraqi farm fields and groves of date palms spread for some distance into the darkness in all directions. The night was quiet. Only the occasional barking of a distant dog and a lonely flickering light gave any indication of the Iraqi village beyond. If intelligence reports were accurate, that village harbored a high-level terrorist leader and perhaps his entourage of well-armed fighters. No lights were visible from the convoy, and darkness blanketed the road, blacking out most of the surroundings to the naked eye. But through the green glow of our night-vision goggles a flurry of activity could be seen: a platoon of Navy SEALs kitted up with helmets, body armor, weapons, and gear, along with an element of Iraqi soldiers, dismounted from the vehicles and quickly aligned in patrol formation.

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* High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, or HMMWV, spoken as "Humvee."

An explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) bomb technician pushed forward and checked out a dirt bridge that crossed the canal ahead. Insurgents often planted deadly explosives at such choke points. Some were powerful enough to wipe out an entire vehicle and all its occupants in a sudden inferno of flying jagged metal and searing heat. For now, the way ahead appeared clear, and the assault force of SEALs and Iraqi soldiers stealthily pushed across the bridge on foot toward a group of buildings where the terrorist reportedly took refuge. A particularly evil insurgent responsible for the deaths of American Soldiers, Iraqi security forces, and innocent civilians, this notorious al Qaeda in Iraq emir had successfully evaded capture for months. Now was a critical opportunity to capture or kill him before his next attack.

The SEAL assault force patrolled up a narrow street between the high walls of residential compounds and moved to the door of the target building.

BOOM!

The deep concussion from the explosive breaching charge shattered the quiet night. It was a hell of a wake-up call for the occupants inside the house as the door blew in, and aggressive, well-armed men ready for a fight entered the house. The Humvees pushed forward across the bridge, down the narrow street wide enough only for a single vehicle, and came to a stop in security positions around the target building. Each vehicle's turret contained a SEAL manning a heavy machine gun, ready to provide fire support if things went sideways.

I was the ground force commander, the senior SEAL in charge of this operation. I had just stepped out of the command vehicle and onto the street near the target building, when suddenly someone yelled: "We've got a squirter!" It was our EOD operator nearby who had seen the "squirter," meaning someone fleeing the target building. Perhaps it was the terrorist himself or someone with information on his whereabouts. We couldn't allow him to escape.

The EOD operator and I were the only ones in position to pursue him, so we sprinted after the man. We chased him down a narrow alleyway, around a group of buildings, and down another dark alleyway that paralleled the street where our Humvees were parked. Finally, we caught up to him, a middle-aged Iraqi man in a traditional Arabic robe, or *dishdasha*. As we were trained, he was quickly forced to the ground and his hands controlled. Those hands didn't possess a weapon, but he might have a grenade in his pocket or, worse, be wearing an explosive suicide belt under his clothing. Anyone associated with such a high-level terrorist might have such deadly devices, and we couldn't assume otherwise. Just to be sure, he had to be searched quickly.

In that instant, I became keenly aware that we were all alone in the world, totally separated from our unit. The rest of our SEAL assault force didn't know where we were. There hadn't been time to notify them. I wasn't even sure exactly where we were located relevant to their position. All around us were darkened windows and rooftops of uncleared buildings, where enemy fighters might be lurking, preparing to attack and unleash hell on us at any second. We had to get back and link up with our troops ASAP.

But even before we could cuff the man's hands and begin a pat-down search for weapons, I heard movement. As I looked down the alleyway through my night-vision goggles, suddenly seven or eight men rounded the corner not forty yards from us. They were heavily armed and rapidly moving toward us. For a split second, my mind questioned what my eyes were seeing. But there it was: the unmistakable outlines of AK-47 rifles, an RPG-7*

* RPG-7, Russian designed shoulder-fired rocket, widely distributed and highly popular among America's enemies for its deadly effectiveness. Contrary to popular belief, "RPG" does not stand for "Rocket Propelled Grenade" but is an acronym for the Russian "Ruchnoy Protivotankovy Granatamyot," which roughly translates: "handheld antitank grenade launcher."

shoulder-fired rocket, and at least one belt-fed machine gun. They weren't there to shake our hands. These were armed enemy fighters maneuvering to attack.

Now, the two of us—the EOD operator and I—were in a hell of a tight spot. The subdued Iraqi man and possible terrorist we were holding had not yet been searched, a situation that carried huge risks. We needed to fall back and link up with the rest of our force. Now, with a larger enemy force maneuvering on us with heavier firepower, the two of us were outnumbered and outgunned. Finally, I desperately needed to resume my role as ground force commander, dispense with handling prisoners, and get back to my job of command and control for the assault force, our vehicles, and coordination with our distant supporting assets. All this had to be accomplished immediately.

I had deployed to Iraq before, but never had I been in a situation like this. Though combat is often depicted in movies and video games, this was not a movie and it certainly was no game. These were heavily armed and dangerous men determined to kill American and Iraqi troops. Were any of us to fall into their hands, we could expect to be tortured in unspeakable ways and then decapitated on video for all the world to see. They wanted nothing more than to kill us and were willing to die by the dozen to do so.

Blood pumping, adrenaline surging, I knew every nanosecond counted. This situation could overwhelm the most competent leader and seasoned combat veteran. But the words of my immediate boss—our task unit commander, Lieutenant Commander Jocko Willink—echoed in my head, words I'd regularly heard during a full year of intensive training and preparation: "Relax. Look around. Make a call." Our SEAL platoon and task unit had trained extensively through dozens of desperate, chaotic, and overwhelming situations to prepare for just such a moment as this. I understood how to implement the Laws of Combat that Jocko

had taught us: Cover and Move, Simple, Prioritize and Execute, and Decentralized Command. The Laws of Combat were the key to not just surviving a dire situation such as this, but actually thriving, enabling us to totally dominate the enemy and *win*. They guided my next move.

Prioritize: Of all the pressing tasks at hand, if I didn't first handle the armed enemy fighters bearing down on us within the next few seconds nothing else would matter. We would be dead. Worse, the enemy fighters would continue their attack and might kill more of our SEAL assault force. This was my highest priority.

Execute: Without hesitation, I engaged the enemy fighters moving toward us with my Colt M4 rifle, hammering the first insurgent in line carrying the RPG with three to four rounds to the chest, dead center. As he dropped, I rapidly shifted fire to the next bad guy, then to the next. The muzzle flashes and report of the rifle announced to all within earshot that a firefight was on. The group of enemy fighters hadn't bargained for this. They panicked, and those who could still run beat a hasty retreat back the way they had come. Some crawled and others dragged the wounded and dying around the street corner and out of sight as I continued to engage them. I knew I had hit at least three or four of them. Though the rounds had been accurate and impacted the enemy fighters' centers of mass, the 5.56mm round was just too small to have much knock-down power. Now the bad guys were around the corner, some no doubt dead or gravely wounded and soon to be. But surely those who were unscathed would regroup and attack again, likely rounding up even more fighters to join their efforts.

We needed to move. There was no time for a complex plan. Nor did I have the luxury of providing specific direction to my shooting buddy, the EOD operator next to me. But we had to execute immediately. Having dealt with the highest priority task—armed enemy fighters maneuvering to attack—and with that threat

at least temporarily checked, our next priority was to fall back and link up with our SEAL assault force. To do this, the EOD operator and I utilized Cover and Move—teamwork. I provided cover fire while he bounded back to a position where he could cover me. Then I moved to a new position to cover for him. Thus, we leapfrogged our way back toward the rest of our team with the prisoner in tow. As soon as we reached the cover of a concrete wall in a perpendicular alleyway, I kept my weapon at the ready to cover while the EOD operator conducted a quick search of the prisoner. Finding no weapons, we then continued back and linked up with our team and, once there, handed off the prisoner to the designated prisoner-handling team with the assault force. Then I resumed my role as ground force commander, directing my mobility commander in charge of the vehicles to move a Humvee with its .50-caliber heavy machine gun to a position where we could repel any further attacks from the direction the enemy fighters had come. Next I had our SEAL radioman communicate with our Tactical Operations Center (TOC) located miles away to keep them informed and get the TOC spinning to coordinate air support to assist us.

For the next half hour, the insurgent fighters attempted to maneuver on us and dumped hundreds of rounds in our direction. But we remained one step ahead of them and repeatedly beat back their attacks. The man we had chased down turned out not to be our target. He was briefly detained for questioning, turned over to a detention facility, but then released. We didn't find our target that night. The al Qaeda in Iraq emir had apparently departed sometime prior to our arrival. But we killed at least a handful of his fighters and we collected valuable intelligence on his operations and organization. Though the operation failed to achieve its primary objective, we did demonstrate to the terrorist and his cronies that there were no areas where they could safely hide. This likely forced him (in the short term, at least) to focus efforts on

his own preservation rather than plotting his next attack. In that, we had helped protect American lives, in addition to Iraqi security forces and innocent civilians, which was at least a consolation prize.

For me, the biggest gain was in leadership lessons learned. Some were simple, as in the acknowledgment that before any combat operation, I needed to do a much more careful map study to memorize the basic layout and the area around the target for those times when I couldn't immediately access my map. Some lessons were procedural, like establishing clear guidance for all our operators about just how far we should chase squirters without first coordinating with the rest of the team. Other lessons were strategic: with proper understanding and application of the Laws of Combat, we had not only survived a difficult and dangerous situation but dominated. As an entire generation of SEAL combat leaders and I would learn, these Laws of Combat could be applied with equal effectiveness in an intense firefight or in far less dynamic or high-pressure situations. They guided me through months of sustained urban combat in Ramadi, throughout my career as a SEAL officer, and beyond.

Those same principles are the key to any team's success on the battlefield or in the business world—any situation where a group of people must work together to execute a task and accomplish a mission. When applied to any team, group, or organization, the proper understanding and execution of these Laws of Combat would mean one thing: victory.

LEADERSHIP: THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR

Leif Babin and Jocko Willink

This book is about leadership. It was written for leaders of teams large and small, for men and women, for any person who aspires to better themselves. Though it contains exciting accounts of SEAL combat operations, this book is not a war memoir. It is instead a

collection of lessons learned from our experiences to help other leaders achieve victory. If it serves as a useful guide to leaders who aspire to build, train, and lead high-performance winning teams, then it has accomplished its purpose.

Among the legions of leadership books in publication, we found most focus on individual practices and personal character traits. We also observed that many corporate leadership training programs and management consulting firms do the same. But without a team—a group of individuals working to accomplish a mission—there can be no leadership. The only meaningful measure for a leader is whether the team succeeds or fails. For all the definitions, descriptions, and characterizations of leaders, there are only two that matter: effective and ineffective. Effective leaders lead successful teams that accomplish their mission and win. Ineffective leaders do not. The principles and concepts described in this book, when properly understood and implemented, enable any leader to become effective and dominate his or her battlefield.

Every leader and every team at some point or time will fail and must confront that failure. That too is a big part of this book. We are by no means infallible leaders; no one is, no matter how experienced. Nor do we have all the answers; no leader does. We've made huge mistakes. Often our mistakes provided the greatest lessons, humbled us, and enabled us to grow and become better. For leaders, the humility to admit and own mistakes and develop a plan to overcome them is essential to success. The best leaders are not driven by ego or personal agendas. They are simply focused on the mission and how best to accomplish it.

As leaders, we have experienced both triumph and tragedy. The bulk of our combat experiences and the stories told in this book come from what will always be the highlight of our military careers: SEAL Team Three, Task Unit Bruiser, and our historic

combat deployment to Ar Ramadi, Iraq, in 2006 through what became known as the "Battle of Ramadi." Jocko led Bruiser as task unit commander. Leif and his SEALs of Charlie Platoon, including lead sniper and point man Chris Kyle, the "American Sniper," and their brother SEALs in Delta Platoon fought in what remains some of the heaviest, sustained urban combat operations in the history of the SEAL Teams. Bruiser SEALs played an integral role in the U.S. Army 1st Armored Division, Ready First Brigade's "Seize, Clear, Hold, and Build" strategy that systemically liberated the war-torn, insurgent-held city of Ramadi and radically lowered the level of violence. These operations established security in the most dangerous and volatile area in Iraq at the time and set the conditions for the "Anbar Awakening," a movement that eventually turned the tide for the United States in Iraq.

In the spring of 2006 when Task Unit Bruiser first arrived in Ramadi, the war-torn capital city of Al Anbar Province was the deadly epicenter of the Iraqi insurgency. Ramadi, a city of four hundred thousand, was a total war zone marred by rubble-pile buildings and bomb craters—the scars of continuous violence. At that time, U.S. forces controlled only about one-third of the city. A brutal insurgency of well-armed and determined enemy fighters controlled the rest. Every day, brave U.S. Soldiers and Marines were bloodied. The Camp Ramadi medical facility saw a near constant flow of severely wounded or dead. Valiant U.S. military surgical teams desperately fought to save lives. A U.S. intelligence report leaked to the press grimly labeled Ramadi and Anbar Province "all but lost." Virtually no one thought it possible that U.S. forces could turn the situation around there and win.

Through the summer and fall of 2006, Jocko orchestrated Task Unit Bruiser's contribution to the Ready First Brigade's efforts as his SEAL platoons fought side by side with U.S. Army Soldiers and Marines to clear out enemy-held areas of the city. Leif led Charlie Platoon's SEALs in scores of violent gun battles

and highly effective sniper overwatch missions. Delta Platoon fought countless fierce battles as well. Together, Task Unit Bruiser SEALs—snipers, riflemen, and machine gunners—killed hundreds of enemy fighters and disrupted enemy attacks on U.S. Soldiers, Marines, and Iraqi security forces.

Bruiser SEALs frequently spearheaded the Ready First operations as the first U.S. troops on the ground in the most dangerous, enemy-held neighborhoods. We secured buildings, took the high ground, and then provided cover as Soldiers and Marines moved into contested areas and Army combat engineers furiously worked to build and fortify outposts in enemy territory. Bruiser SEALs and the Ready First Soldiers and Marines built a bond that will forever be remembered by those who served there. Through much blood, sweat, and toil, the Ready First Combat Team and Task Unit Bruiser accomplished the mission. The violent insurgency was routed from the city, tribal sheikhs in Ramadi joined with U.S. forces, and the Anbar Awakening was born. Ultimately, in the months following TU Bruiser's departure, Ramadi was stabilized and violence plummeted to levels previously unimaginable.

Tragically, Task Unit Bruiser paid a tremendous cost for the success of these operations: eight SEALs were wounded and three of the best SEAL warriors imaginable gave their lives. Marc Lee and Mike Monsoor were killed in action; Ryan Job was blinded by an enemy sniper's bullet and later died while in the hospital recovering from surgery to repair his combat wounds. These losses were devastating to us. And yet they were only three of nearly one hundred U.S. troops killed in action that were part of the Ready First Brigade Combat Team, each one a tragic, immeasurable loss.

Despite the doubters and naysayers, Ramadi was won, the city stabilized, and the populace secured. By early 2007, enemy attacks plunged from an average of thirty to fifty each day throughout much of 2006, to an average of one per week, then one per month.

Ramadi remained a model of stability and one of the safest areas of Iraq, outside the historically stable Kurdish-controlled north, for years afterward.

These operations were victorious but also extremely humbling; the takeaways—both good and bad—vast. The Battle of Ramadi provided a litany of lessons learned, which we were able to capture and pass on. The greatest of these was the recognition that leadership is the most important factor on the battlefield, the single greatest reason behind the success of any team. By leadership, we do not mean just the senior commanders at the top, but the crucial leaders at every level of the team—the senior enlisted leaders, the fire team leaders in charge of four people, the squad leaders in charge of eight, and the junior petty officers that stepped up, took charge, and led. They each played an integral role in the success of our team. We were fortunate for the opportunity to lead such an amazing group of SEALs who triumphed in that difficult fight.

Upon returning home from combat, we stepped into critical roles as leadership instructors. For many years, Navy SEAL leadership training consisted almost entirely of OJT (on the job training) and mentoring. How a junior leader was brought up depended entirely on the strength, experience, and patient guidance of a mentor. Some mentors were exceptional; others, lacking. While mentorship from the right leaders is critical, this method left some substantial gaps in leadership knowledge and understanding. We helped to change that and developed leadership training curriculum to build a strong foundation for all SEAL leaders.

As the officer in charge of all training for the West Coast SEAL Teams, Jocko directed some of the most realistic and challenging combat training in the world. He placed new emphasis on training leaders in critical decision making and effective communication in high-pressure situations to better prepare them for combat. Leif

ran the SEAL Junior Officer Training Course, the basic leadership training program for every officer who graduated from the SEAL training pipeline. There, he reshaped and enhanced training to more effectively establish the critical leadership foundations necessary for new SEAL officers to succeed in combat. In these roles, we helped guide a new generation of SEAL leaders who continue to perform with unparalleled success on the battlefield, validating the leadership principles we taught them.

Some may wonder how Navy SEAL combat leadership principles translate outside the military realm to leading any team in any capacity. But combat is reflective of life, only amplified and intensified. Decisions have immediate consequences, and everything—absolutely everything—is at stake. The right decision, even when all seems lost, can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The wrong decision, even when a victorious outcome seems all but certain, can result in deadly, catastrophic failure. In that regard, a combat leader can acquire a lifetime of leadership lessons learned in only a few deployments.

We hope to dispel the myth that military leadership is easy because subordinates robotically and blindly follow orders. On the contrary, U.S. military personnel are smart, creative, freethinking individuals—human beings. They must literally risk life and limb to accomplish the mission. For this reason, they must believe in the cause for which they are fighting. They must believe in the plan they are asked to execute, and most important, they must believe in and trust the leader they are asked to follow. This is especially true in the SEAL Teams, where innovation and input from everyone (including the most junior personnel) are encouraged.

Combat leadership requires getting a diverse team of people in various groups to execute highly complex missions in order to achieve strategic goals—something that directly correlates with

any company or organization. The same principles that make SEAL combat leaders and SEAL units so effective on the battlefield can be applied to the business world with the same success.

Since leaving the SEAL Teams, we have worked with companies across a wide array of industries, from the financial, energy, technology, and construction sectors to the insurance, auto, retail, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, and service sectors. Having trained and worked with a large number of leaders and company leadership teams, we have witnessed the extraordinary impact in increased efficiency, productivity, and profitability that results when these principles are properly understood and implemented.

The leadership and teamwork concepts contained in this book are not abstract theories, but practical and applicable. We encourage leaders to do the things they know they probably should be doing but aren't. By not doing those things, they are failing as leaders and failing their teams. While rooted in common sense and based on the reality of practical experience, these principles require skill to implement. Such concepts are *simple, but not easy,** and they apply to virtually any situation—to any group, team, organization, or individual seeking to improve performance, capability, efficiency, and teamwork. They are sometimes counterintuitive and require focused effort and training to implement in practice. But this book provides the necessary guidance so that anyone can apply the principles and, with dedication and discipline over time, master them and become effective leaders.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

The lessons we learned as SEAL leaders through our combined years of experience are numerous. For this book, we have focused our efforts on the most critical aspects: the fundamental building

* "Simple, not easy" is a phrase used often by former UFC fighter and World Champion Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt Dean Lister, a three-time Submission Grappling World Champion.

blocks of leadership. The book derives its title from the underlying principle—the mind-set—that provides the foundation for all the rest: Extreme Ownership. Leaders must own everything in their world. There is no one else to blame.

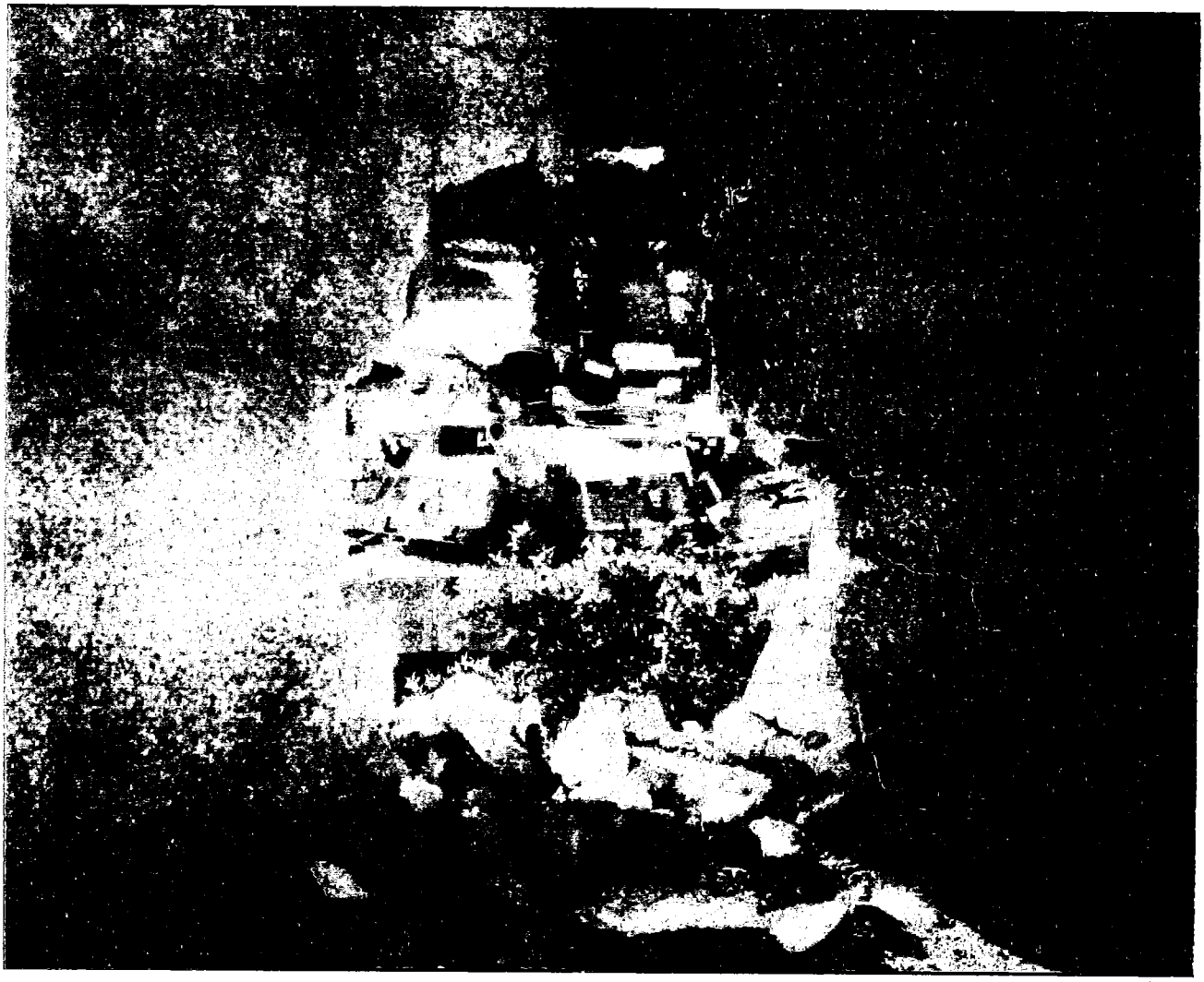
This book is organized into three parts: Part I: "Winning the War Within"; Part II: "The Laws of Combat"; and Part III: "Sustaining Victory." "Winning the War Within" develops the fundamental building blocks and mind-set necessary to lead and win. "The Laws of Combat" covers the four critical concepts (described earlier) that enable a team to perform at the highest level and dominate. Finally, "Sustaining Victory" discusses the more nuanced and difficult balance that leaders must navigate in order to maintain the edge and keep the team perpetually operating at the highest level.

Each chapter focuses on a different leadership concept, each unique though closely related and often mutually supporting. Within each chapter there are three subsections. The first identifies a leadership lesson learned through our U.S. Navy SEAL combat or training experience. The second subsection explains that leadership principle. The third demonstrates the principle's application to the business world, based on our work with a multitude of companies in a broad range of industries.

We believe in these leadership concepts because we have seen them work time and again, both in combat and in business. Their proper application and understanding ensure effective leaders and high-performing teams that produce extraordinary results. These principles empower those teams to dominate their battlefields by enabling leaders to fulfill their purpose: *lead* and *win*.

PART I

WINNING THE WAR WITHIN



U.S. Army M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank from Task Force Bandit as seen through a SEAL sniper loophole. Task Force Bandit (1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment of the 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division) was an outstanding unit with whom Bruiser SEALs worked closely. They were aggressive, professional, and courageous. Loopholes, created by either explosives or manual tools, allowed SEAL snipers to observe and engage enemy fighters while remaining somewhat protected from enemy fire.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

CHAPTER 1

Extreme Ownership

Jocko Willink

THE MA'LAAB DISTRICT, RAMADI, IRAQ: FOG OF WAR

The early morning light was dimmed by a literal fog of war that filled the air: soot from tires the insurgents had set alight in the streets, clouds of dust kicked up from the road by U.S. tanks and Humvees, and powdered concrete from the walls of buildings pulverized by machine gun fire. As our armored Humvee rounded the corner and headed down the street toward the gunfire, I saw a U.S. M1A2 Abrams tank in the middle of the road up ahead, its turret rotated with the huge main gun trained on a building at almost point-blank range. Through the particle-filled air, I could see a smoky-red mist, clearly from a red smoke grenade used by American forces in the area as a general signal for "Help!"

My mind was racing. This was our first major operation in Ramadi and it was total chaos. Beyond the literal fog of war impeding our vision, the figurative "fog of war," often attributed to Prussian

military strategist Carl von Clausewitz,* had descended upon us, and it was thick with confusion, inaccurate information, broken communications, and mayhem. For this operation, we had four separate elements of SEALs in various sectors of this violent, war-torn city: two SEAL sniper teams with U.S. Army scout snipers and a contingent of Iraqi soldiers, and another element of SEALs embedded with Iraqi soldiers and their U.S. Army combat advisors assigned to clear an entire sector building by building. Finally, my SEAL senior enlisted advisor (a noncommissioned officer) and I rode along with one of the Army company commanders. In total, about three hundred U.S. and Iraqi troops—friendly forces—were operating in this dangerous and hotly contested neighborhood of eastern Ramadi known as the Ma'laab District. The entire place was crawling with *muj* (pronounced "mooj"), as American forces called them. The enemy insurgent fighters called themselves *mujahideen*, Arabic for "those engaged in jihad," which we shortened for expediency. They subscribed to a ruthless, militant version of Islam and they were cunning, barbaric, and lethal. For years, the Ma'laab had remained firmly in their hands. Now, U.S. forces aimed to change that.

The operation had kicked off before sunrise, and with the sun now creeping up over the horizon, everyone was shooting. The myriad of radio networks (or nets) used by the U.S. ground and air units exploded with chatter and incoming reports. Details of U.S. and Iraqi troops wounded or killed came in from different sectors. Following them were reports of enemy fighters killed. U.S. elements tried to decipher what was happening with other U.S. and Iraqi units in adjacent sectors. U.S. Marine Corps ANGLICO (Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company) teams coordinated with American attack aircraft overhead in an effort to drop bombs on enemy positions.

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* "War is the realm of uncertainty," *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), Prussian general and military theorist. Clausewitz never actually used the term "Fog of War."

Only a few hours into the operation, both of my SEAL sniper elements had been attacked and were now embroiled in serious gunfights. As the element of Iraqi soldiers, U.S. Army Soldiers, and our SEALs cleared buildings across the sector, they met heavy resistance. Dozens of insurgent fighters mounted blistering attacks with PKC* Russian belt-fed machine guns, deadly RPG-7 shoulder-fired rockets, and AK-47 automatic rifle fire. As we monitored the radio, we heard the U.S. advisors with one of the Iraqi Army elements in advance of the rest report they were engaged in a fierce firefight and requested the QRF (Quick Reaction Force) for help. This particular QRF consisted of four U.S. Army armored Humvees, each mounted with an M2 .50-caliber heavy machine gun, and a dozen or so U.S. Soldiers that could dismount and render assistance. Minutes later, over the radio net, one of my SEAL sniper teams called for the "heavy QRF," a section (meaning two) of U.S. M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tanks that could bring the thunder with their 120mm main guns and machine guns. That meant my SEALs were in a world of hurt and in need of serious help. I asked the U.S. Army company commander we were with to follow the tanks in, and he complied.

Our Humvee rolled to a stop just behind one of the Abrams tanks, its huge main gun pointed directly at a building and ready to engage. Pushing open the heavy armored door of my vehicle, I stepped out onto the street. I had a gut feeling that something was wrong.

Running over to a Marine ANGLICO gunnery sergeant, I asked him, "What's going on?"

"Hot damn!" he shouted with excitement. "There's some *muj*

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* PK for Pulemet Kalashnikova, a Russian-designed belt-fed medium machine gun that fires a deadly 7.62x54R (7.62mm x 54mm rimmed) cartridge, generally in hundred-round (or more) belts. The PKM/PKS are common variants. The U.S. military in Iraq frequently used the designation "PKC," with the Cyrillic spelling for "PKS."

in that building right there putting up a serious fight!" He pointed to the building across the street, his weapon trained in that direction. It was clear he thought these *muj* were hard-core. "They killed one of our Iraqi soldiers when we entered the building and wounded a few more. We've been hammering them, and I'm working to get some bombs dropped on 'em now." He was in the midst of coordinating an airstrike with U.S. aircraft overhead to wipe out the enemy fighters holed up inside the building.

I looked around. The building he pointed to was riddled with bullet holes. The QRF Humvees had put over 150 rounds from a .50-caliber heavy machine gun into it and many more smaller caliber rounds from their rifles and light machines. Now the Abrams tank had its huge main gun trained on the building, preparing to reduce it to rubble and kill everyone inside. And if that still didn't do the job, bombs from the sky would be next.

But something didn't add up. We were extremely close to where one of our SEAL sniper teams was supposed to be. That sniper team had abandoned the location they had originally planned to use and were in the process of relocating to a new building when all the shooting started. In the mayhem, they hadn't reported their exact location, but I knew it would be close to the point where I was standing, close to the building the Marine gunny had just pointed to. What really didn't add up was that these Iraqi soldiers and their U.S. advisors shouldn't have arrived here for another couple of hours. No other friendly forces were to have entered this sector until we had properly "deconflicted"—determined the exact position of our SEAL sniper team and passed that information to the other friendly units in the operation. But for some reason there were dozens of Iraqi troops and their U.S. Army and Marine combat advisors in the area. It made no sense to me.

"Hold what you got, Gunny. I'm going to check it out," I said, motioning toward the building on which he had been working to

coordinate the airstrike. He looked at me as if I were completely crazy. His Marines and a full platoon of Iraqi soldiers had been engaged in a vicious firefight with the enemy fighters inside that house and couldn't dislodge them. Whoever they were, they had put up one hell of a fight. In the gunny's mind, for us to even approach that place was pretty much suicidal. I nodded at my senior enlisted SEAL, who nodded back, and we moved across the street toward the enemy-infested house. Like most of the houses in Iraq, there was an eight-foot concrete wall around it. We approached the door to the compound, which was slightly open. With my M4 rifle at the ready, I kicked the door the rest of the way open only to find I was staring at one of my SEAL platoon chiefs. He stared back at me in wide-eyed surprise.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Some *muj* entered the compound. We shot one of them and they attacked—hard-core. They brought it." I remembered what the gunny had just told me: one of their Iraqi soldiers had been shot when he entered the compound.

At that moment, it all became clear. In the chaos and confusion, somehow a rogue element of Iraqi soldiers had strayed outside the boundaries to which they had been confined and attempted to enter the building occupied by our SEAL sniper team. In the early morning darkness, our SEAL sniper element had seen the silhouette of a man armed with an AK-47 creep into their compound. While there were not supposed to be any friendlies in the vicinity, there were many enemy fighters known to be in the area. With that in mind, our SEALs had engaged the man with the AK-47, thinking they were under attack. Then all hell broke loose.

When gunfire erupted from the house, the Iraqi soldiers outside the compound returned fire and pulled back behind the cover of the concrete walls across the street and in the surrounding buildings. They called in reinforcements, and U.S. Marines and

Army troops responded with a vicious barrage of gunfire into the house they assumed was occupied by enemy fighters. Meanwhile, inside the house our SEALs were pinned down and unable to clearly identify that it was *friendlies* shooting at them. All they could do was return fire as best they could and keep up the fight to prevent being overrun by what they thought were enemy fighters. The U.S. Marine ANGLICO team had come very close to directing airstrikes on the house our SEALs were holed up in. When the .50-caliber machine gun opened up on their position, our SEAL sniper element inside the building, thinking they were under heavy enemy attack, called in the heavy QRF Abrams tanks for support. That's when I had arrived on the scene.

Inside the compound, the SEAL chief stared back at me, somewhat confused. He no doubt wondered how I had just walked through the hellacious enemy attack to reach his building.

"It was a blue-on-blue," I said to him. Blue-on-blue—friendly fire, fratricide—the worst thing that could happen. To be killed or wounded by the enemy in battle was bad enough. But to be accidently killed or wounded by friendly fire because someone had screwed up was the most horrible fate. It was also a reality. I had heard the story of X-Ray Platoon from SEAL Team One in Vietnam. The squads split up on a night patrol in the jungle, lost their bearings, and when they bumped into each other again in the darkness, they mistook each other for enemy and opened up with gunfire. A ferocious firefight ensued, leaving one of their own dead and several wounded. That was the last X-Ray Platoon in the SEAL Teams. Henceforth, the name was banished. It was a curse—and a lesson. Friendly fire was completely unacceptable in the SEAL Teams. And now it had just happened to us—to my SEAL task unit.

"What?" the SEAL chief asked with utter disbelief.

"It was a blue-on-blue," I said again, calmly and as a matter of fact. There was no time to debate or discuss. There were real

bad guys out there, and even as we spoke, sporadic gunfire could be heard all around as other elements engaged insurgents in the vicinity. "Now what do ya got?" I asked, needing to know his status and that of his men.

"One SEAL fragged in the face—not too bad. But everyone is rattled. Let's get them out of here," replied the chief.

An armored personnel carrier (APC)* had arrived with the heavy QRF and was sitting out front. "There's an APC out front. Get your boys loaded up," I told him.

"Roger," said the chief.

The SEAL chief, one of the best tactical leaders I'd ever known, quickly got the rest of his SEALs and other troopers down to the front door. They looked more rattled than any human beings I had ever seen. Having been on the receiving end of devastating .50-caliber machine gun rounds punching through the walls around them, they had stared death in the face and did not think they would survive. But they quickly got it together, boarded the APC, and left for the nearby U.S. forward operating base—except the SEAL chief. Tough as nails and ready for more, he stayed with me, unfazed by what had happened and ready for whatever came next.

I made my way back over to the Marine ANGLICO gunny. "The building is clear," I told him.

"Roger that, Sir," he replied, looking surprised as he quickly reported it on the radio.

"Where's the captain?" I asked, wanting to find the U.S. Army company commander.

"Upstairs, here," he replied motioning toward the building we were in front of.

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* M113 armored personnel carrier, a tank-tracked vehicle first used by U.S. forces in Vietnam, employed in Iraq for troop transport and casualty evacuation. With a crew of two or three, it can carry up to ten personnel.

I walked upstairs and found the company commander hunkered down on the roof of a building. "Everyone OK?" he asked.

"It was a blue-on-blue," I replied bluntly.

"What?" he asked, stunned.

"It was a blue-on-blue," I repeated. "One Iraqi soldier KIA,* a few more wounded. One of my guys wounded, fragged in the face. Everyone else is OK, by a miracle."

"Roger," he replied, stunned and disappointed at what had transpired. No doubt, as an outstanding leader himself, he felt somewhat responsible. But having operated in this chaotic urban battlefield for months alongside Iraqi soldiers, he knew how easily such a thing could happen.

But we still had work to do and had to drive on. The operation continued. We conducted two more back-to-back missions, cleared a large portion of the Ma'laab District, and killed dozens of insurgents. The rest of the mission was a success.

But that didn't matter. I felt sick. One of my men was wounded. An Iraqi soldier was dead and others were wounded. We did it to ourselves, and it happened under my command.

When we completed the last mission of the day, I went to the battalion tactical operations center where I had my field computer set up to receive e-mail from higher headquarters. I dreaded opening and answering the inevitable e-mail inquiries about what had transpired. I wished I had died out on the battlefield. I felt that I deserved it.

My e-mail in-box was full. Word had rapidly spread that we had had a blue-on-blue. I opened an e-mail from my commanding officer (CO) that went straight to the point. It read: "SHUT DOWN. CONDUCT NO MORE OPERATIONS. INVESTIGATING OFFICER, COMMAND MASTER CHIEF, AND I ARE EN ROUTE." In typical fashion for a Navy mishap, the CO had appointed an investigating

* killed in action

officer to determine the facts of what happened and who was responsible.

Another e-mail from one of my old bosses stationed in another city in Iraq, but privy to what was happening in Ramadi, read simply, "Heard you had a blue-on-blue. What the hell?"

All the good things I had done and the solid reputation I had worked hard to establish in my career as a SEAL were now meaningless. Despite the many successful combat operations I had led, I was now the commander of a unit that had committed the SEAL mortal sin.

A day passed as I waited for the arrival of the investigating officer, our CO, and command master chief (CMC), the senior enlisted SEAL at the command. In the meantime, they directed me to prepare a brief detailing what had happened. I knew what this meant. They were looking for someone to blame, and most likely someone to "relieve"—the military euphemism for someone to fire.

Frustrated, angry, and disappointed that this had happened, I began gathering information. As we debriefed, it was obvious there were some serious mistakes made by many individuals both during the planning phase and on the battlefield during execution. Plans were altered but notifications weren't sent. The communication plan was ambiguous, and confusion about the specific timing of radio procedures contributed to critical failures. The Iraqi Army had adjusted their plan but had not told us. Timelines were pushed without clarification. Locations of friendly forces had not been reported. The list went on and on.

Within Task Unit Bruiser—my own SEAL troop—similar mistakes had been made. The specific location of the sniper team in question had not been passed on to other units. Positive identification of the assumed enemy combatant, who turned out to be an Iraqi soldier, had been insufficient. A thorough SITREP (situation report) had not been passed to me after the initial engagement took place.

The list of mistakes was substantial. As directed, I put together a brief, a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation with timelines and depictions of the movements of friendly units on a map of the area. Then I assembled the list of everything that everyone had done wrong.

It was a thorough explanation of what had happened. It outlined the critical failures that had turned the mission into a nightmare and cost the life of one Iraqi soldier, wounded several more, and, but for a true miracle, could have cost several of our SEALs their lives.

But something was missing. There was some problem, some piece that I hadn't identified, and it made me feel like the truth wasn't coming out. Who was to blame?

I reviewed my brief again and again trying to figure out the missing piece, the single point of failure that had led to the incident. But there were so many factors, and I couldn't figure it out.

Finally, the CO, the CMC, and the investigating officer arrived at our base. They were going to drop their gear, grab some food at the chow hall, and then we would bring everyone together to debrief the event.

I looked through my notes again, trying to place the blame.

Then it hit me.

Despite all the failures of individuals, units, and leaders, and despite the myriad mistakes that had been made, there was only one person to blame for everything that had gone wrong on the operation: me. I hadn't been with our sniper team when they engaged the Iraqi soldier. I hadn't been controlling the rogue element of Iraqis that entered the compound. But that didn't matter. As the SEAL task unit commander, the senior leader on the ground in charge of the mission, I was responsible for everything in Task Unit Bruiser. I had to take complete ownership of what went wrong. That is what a leader does—even if it means getting fired.

If anyone was to be blamed and fired for what happened, let it be me.

A few minutes later, I walked into the platoon space where everyone was gathered to debrief. The silence was deafening. The CO sat in the front row. The CMC stood ominously in the back. The SEAL that had been wounded—fragged in the face by a .50-caliber round—was there, his face bandaged up.

I stood before the group. "Whose fault was this?" I asked to the roomful of teammates.

After a few moments of silence, the SEAL who had mistakenly engaged the Iraqi solider spoke up: "It was my fault. I should have positively identified my target."

"No," I responded, "It wasn't your fault. Whose fault was it?" I asked the group again.

"It was my fault," said the radioman from the sniper element. "I should have passed our position sooner."

"Wrong," I responded. "It wasn't your fault. Whose fault was it?" I asked again.

"It was my fault," said another SEAL, who was a combat advisor with the Iraqi Army clearance team. "I should have controlled the Iraqis and made sure they stayed in their sector."

"Negative," I said. "You are not to blame." More of my SEALs were ready to explain what they had done wrong and how it had contributed to the failure. But I had heard enough.

"You know whose fault this is? You know who gets all the blame for this?" The entire group sat there in silence, including the CO, the CMC, and the investigating officer. No doubt they were wondering whom I would hold responsible. Finally, I took a deep breath and said, "There is only one person to blame for this: me. I am the commander. I am responsible for the entire operation. As the senior man, I am responsible for every action that takes place on the battlefield. There is no one to blame but me. And I

will tell you this right now: I will make sure that nothing like this ever happens to us again."

It was a heavy burden to bear. But it was absolutely true. I was the leader. I was in charge and I was responsible. Thus, I had to take ownership of everything that went wrong. Despite the tremendous blow to my reputation and to my ego, it was the right thing to do—the only thing to do. I apologized to the wounded SEAL, explaining that it was my fault he was wounded and that we were all lucky he wasn't dead. We then proceeded to go through the entire operation, piece by piece, identifying everything that happened and what we could do going forward to prevent it from happening again.

Looking back, it is clear that, despite what happened, the full ownership I took of the situation actually increased the trust my commanding officer and master chief had in me. If I had tried to pass the blame on to others, I suspect I would have been fired—deservedly so. The SEALs in the troop, who did not expect me to take the blame, respected the fact that I had taken full responsibility for everything that had happened. They knew it was a dynamic situation caused by a multitude of factors, but I owned them all.

The U.S. Army and U.S. Marine conventional commanders took the debrief points as lessons learned and moved on. Having fought in Ramadi for an extended period of time, they understood something we SEALs did not: blue-on-blue was a risk that had to be mitigated as much as possible in an urban environment, but that risk could not be eliminated. This was urban combat, the most complex and difficult of all warfare, and it was simply impossible to conduct operations without some risk of blue-on-blue. But for SEALs accustomed to working in small groups against point targets, fratricide should never happen.

A very senior and highly respected SEAL officer, who before

joining the Navy had been a U.S. Marine Corps platoon commander in Vietnam at the historic Battle of Hue City, came to visit our task unit shortly after the incident. He told me that many of the Marine casualties in Hue were friendly fire, part of the brutal reality of urban combat. He understood what we had experienced and just how easily it could happen.

But, while a blue-on-blue incident in an environment like Ramadi might be likely, if not expected, we vowed to never let it happen again. We analyzed what had happened and implemented the lessons learned. We revised our standard operating procedures and planning methodology to better mitigate risk. As a result of this tragic incident, we undoubtedly saved lives going forward. While we were mistakenly engaged by friendly elements again many times during the rest of the deployment, we never let it escalate and were always able to regain control quickly.

But the tactical avoidance of fratricide was only part of what I learned. When I returned home from deployment, I took over Training Detachment One, which managed all training for West Coast SEAL platoons and task units in preparation for combat deployments. I set up scenarios where blue-on-blue shootings were almost guaranteed to happen. When they did, we, the training cadre, explained how to avoid them.

But more important, the commanders in training could learn what I had learned about leadership. While some commanders took full responsibility for blue-on-blue, others blamed their subordinates for simulated fratricide incidents in training. These weaker commanders would get a solid explanation about the burden of command and the deep meaning of responsibility: the leader is truly and ultimately responsible for *everything.*

That is Extreme Ownership, the fundamental core of what constitutes an effective leader in the SEAL Teams or in any leadership endeavor.

PRINCIPLE

On any team, in any organization, all responsibility for success and failure rests with the leader. *The leader must own everything in his or her world.* There is no one else to blame. The leader must acknowledge mistakes and admit failures, take ownership of them, and develop a plan to win.

The best leaders don't just take responsibility for their job. They take Extreme Ownership of everything that impacts their mission. This fundamental core concept enables SEAL leaders to lead high-performing teams in extraordinary circumstances and win. But Extreme Ownership isn't a principle whose application is limited to the battlefield. This concept is the number-one characteristic of any high-performance winning team, in any military unit, organization, sports team or business team in any industry.

When subordinates aren't doing what they should, leaders that exercise Extreme Ownership cannot blame the subordinates. They must first look in the mirror at themselves. The leader bears full responsibility for explaining the strategic mission, developing the tactics, and securing the training and resources to enable the team to properly and successfully execute.

If an individual on the team is not performing at the level required for the team to succeed, the leader must train and mentor that underperformer. But if the underperformer continually fails to meet standards, then a leader who exercises Extreme Ownership must be loyal to the team and the mission above any individual. If underperformers cannot improve, the leader must make the tough call to terminate them and hire others who can get the job done. It is all on the leader.

As individuals, we often attribute the success of others to luck or circumstances and make excuses for our own failures and the failures of our team. We blame our own poor performance on bad luck, circumstances beyond our control, or poorly performing

subordinates—anyone but ourselves. Total responsibility for failure is a difficult thing to accept, and taking ownership when things go wrong requires extraordinary humility and courage. But doing just that is an absolute necessity to learning, growing as a leader, and improving a team's performance.

Extreme Ownership requires leaders to look at an organization's problems through the objective lens of reality, without emotional attachments to agendas or plans. It mandates that a leader set ego aside, accept responsibility for failures, attack weaknesses, and consistently work to a build a better and more effective team. Such a leader, however, does not take credit for his or her team's successes but bestows that honor upon his subordinate leaders and team members. When a leader sets such an example and expects this from junior leaders within the team, the mindset develops into the team's culture at every level. With Extreme Ownership, junior leaders take charge of their smaller teams and their piece of the mission. Efficiency and effectiveness increase exponentially and a high-performance, winning team is the result.

APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

The vice president's plan looked good on paper. The board of directors had approved the plan the previous year and thought it could decrease production costs. But it wasn't working. And the board wanted to find out why. Who was at fault? Who was to blame?

I was brought on by the company to help provide leadership guidance and executive coaching to the company's vice president of manufacturing (VP). Although technically sound and experienced in his particular industry, the VP hadn't met the manufacturing goals set forth by the company's board of directors. His plan included the following: consolidate manufacturing plants to eliminate redundancy, increase worker productivity through an

incentivized bonus program, and streamline the manufacturing process.

The problem arose in the plan's execution. At each quarterly board meeting, the VP delivered a myriad of excuses as to why so little of his plan had been executed. After a year, the board wondered if he could effectively lead this change. With little progress to show, the VP's job was now at risk.

I arrived on scene two weeks before the next board meeting. After spending several hours with the CEO to get some color on the situation, I was introduced to the VP of manufacturing. My initial assessment was positive. The VP was extremely smart and incredibly knowledgeable about the business. But would he be open to coaching?

"So, you're here to help me, right?" the VP inquired.

Knowing that, due to ego, some people bristle at the idea of criticism and coaching no matter how constructive, I chose to take a more indirect approach.

"Maybe not so much here to help *you,* but here to help the situation," I answered, effectively lowering the VP's defenses.

In the weeks leading up to the board meeting, I researched and examined the details of why the VP's plan had failed and what had gone wrong, and I spoke to the VP about the problems encountered in the plan's execution. He explained that the consolidation of manufacturing plants had failed because his distribution managers feared that increasing the distance between plants and distribution centers would prevent face-to-face interaction with the manufacturing team and reduce their ability to tweak order specifics. They surmised it would also inhibit their ability to handle rush-order deliveries. The VP dismissed his distribution managers' concerns as unfounded. In the event the need arose to adjust orders or customize, a teleconference or videoconference would more than suffice.

The VP also explained why the incentivized bonus structure

hadn't been put in place. Each time his plant managers and other key leaders were presented with the rollout plan, they pushed back with concerns: the employees wouldn't make enough money; they would leave for jobs with higher base salaries that didn't require minimum standards; recruiters would capitalize on the change and pull skilled workers away. When the VP pushed the manufacturing managers harder, they teamed up with the sales managers. The two groups opposed the VP's plan, claiming it was the company's reputation for skilled manufacturing that kept business coming in, and such a change would put the business at risk.

Finally, when it came to the VP's plan to streamline the manufacturing process, the pushback was universal and straight from the classic mantra of antichange: "We have always done it this way;" and "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"What does the board think of these reasons?" I asked, as we discussed the upcoming annual board meeting.

"They listen, but I don't think they really understand them. And they have been hearing the same reasons for a while now, so I think they are getting frustrated. I don't know if they believe them anymore. They sound like . . ."

"Excuses?" I finished the sentence for the VP, knowing the word itself was a big blow to his ego.

"Yes. Yes, they sound like excuses. But these are real and legitimate," insisted the VP.

"Could there be other reasons your plan wasn't successfully executed?" I asked.

"Absolutely," the VP answered. "The market has been tough. New technology advancements have taken some time to work through. Everyone got focused on some products that never really amounted to much. So, yes, there are a host of other reasons."

"Those all may be factors. But there is one most important reason why this plan has failed," I said.

"What reason is that?" the VP inquired with interest.

I paused for a moment to see if the VP was ready for what I had to tell him. The impact would be uncomfortable, but there was no way around it. I stated it plainly, "You. You are the reason."

The VP was surprised, then defensive. "Me?" he protested. "I came up with the plan! I have delivered it over and over. It's not my fault they aren't executing it!"

I listened patiently.

"The plant managers, the distribution and sales teams don't fully support the plan," he continued. "So how am I supposed to execute it? I'm not out there in the field with them. I can't make them listen to me." The VP's statements gradually became less emphatic. He soon realized what he was saying: he was making excuses.

I explained that the direct responsibility of a leader included getting people to listen, support, and execute plans. To drive the point home, I told him, "You can't *make* people listen to you. You can't *make* them execute. That might be a temporary solution for a simple task. But to implement real change, to drive people to accomplish something truly complex or difficult or dangerous—you can't *make* people do those things. You have to *lead* them."

"I did lead them," the VP protested. "They just didn't execute."

But he hadn't led them, at least not effectively. The measure of this was clear: he had been unsuccessful in implementing his plan.

"When I was in charge of a SEAL platoon or a SEAL task unit conducting combat operations, do you think every operation I led was a success?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No."

"Absolutely not," I agreed. "Sure, I led many operations that went well and accomplished the mission. But not always. I have been in charge of operations that went horribly wrong for a number of reasons: bad intelligence, bad decisions by subordinate

leadership, mistakes by shooters, coordinating units not following the plan. The list goes on. Combat is a dangerous, complex, dynamic situation, where all kinds of things can go sideways in a hurry, with life and death consequences. There is no way to control every decision, every person, every occurrence that happens out there. It is just impossible. But let me tell you something: when things went wrong, you know who I blamed?" I asked, pausing slightly for this to sink in. "Me," I said. "I blamed me."

I continued: "As the commander, everything that happened on the battlefield was my responsibility. *Everything.* If a supporting unit didn't do what we needed it to do, then I hadn't given clear instructions. If one of my machine gunners engaged targets outside his field of fire, then I had not ensured he understood where his field of fire was. If the enemy surprised us and hit us where we hadn't expected, then I hadn't thought through all the possibilities. No matter what, I could never blame other people when a mission went wrong."

The VP contemplated this. After a thoughtful silence, he responded, "I always thought I was a good leader. I've always been in leadership positions."

"That might be one of the issues: in your mind you are doing everything right. So when things go wrong, instead of looking at yourself, you blame others. But no one is infallible. With Extreme Ownership, you must remove individual ego and personal agenda. It's all about the mission. How can you best get your team to most effectively execute the plan in order to accomplish the mission?" I continued. "That is the question you have to ask yourself. That is what Extreme Ownership is all about."

The VP nodded, beginning to grasp the concept and see its effectiveness.

"Do you think that every one of your employees is blatantly disobedient?" I said.

"No," the VP said.

"If so, they would need to be fired. But that doesn't seem to be the situation here," I continued. "Your people don't need to be fired. They need to be led."

"So what am I doing wrong as a leader?" asked the VP. "How can I lead them?"

"It all starts right here with you," I said. "You must assume total ownership of the failure to implement your new plan. You are to blame. And that is exactly what you need to tell the board."

"Tell the board that? Are you serious?" the VP asked in disbelief. "I don't mind taking a little blame, but this is not all my fault." Though beginning to see the light, he still resisted the idea of taking total responsibility.

"In order to execute this plan, in order to truly become an effective leader, you have to realize and accept total responsibility," I said. "You have to own it."

The VP was not yet convinced.

"If one of your manufacturing managers came to you and said, 'My team is failing,' what would your response be? Would you blame their team?" I asked.

"No," the VP admitted.

I explained that as the officer in charge of training for the West Coast SEAL Teams, we put SEAL units through highly demanding scenarios to get them ready for combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. When SEAL leaders were placed in worst-case-scenario training situations, it was almost always the leaders' attitudes that determined whether their SEAL units would ultimately succeed or fail. We knew how hard the training missions were because we had designed them.

In virtually every case, the SEAL troops and platoons that didn't perform well had leaders who blamed everyone and everything else—their troops, their subordinate leaders, or the scenario. They blamed the SEAL training instructor staff; they blamed inadequate equipment or the experience level of their men.

They refused to accept responsibility. Poor performance and mission failure were the result.

The best-performing SEAL units had leaders who accepted responsibility for everything. Every mistake, every failure or shortfall—those leaders would own it. During the debrief after a training mission, those good SEAL leaders took ownership of failures, sought guidance on how to improve, and figured out a way to overcome challenges on the next iteration. The best leaders checked their egos, accepted blame, sought out constructive criticism, and took detailed notes for improvement. They exhibited Extreme Ownership, and as a result, their SEAL platoons and task units dominated.

When a bad SEAL leader walked into a debrief and blamed everyone else, that attitude was picked up by subordinates and team members, who then followed suit. They all blamed everyone else, and inevitably the team was ineffective and unable to properly execute a plan.

Continuing, I told the VP, "In those situations, you ended up with a unit that never felt they were to blame for anything. All they did was make excuses and ultimately never made the adjustments necessary to fix problems. Now, compare that to the commander who came in and took the blame. He said, 'My subordinate leaders made bad calls; I must not have explained the overall intent well enough.' Or, 'The assault force didn't execute the way I envisioned; I need to make sure they better understand my intent and rehearse more thoroughly.' The good leaders took ownership of the mistakes and shortfalls. That's the key difference. And how do you think their SEAL platoons and task units reacted to this type of leadership?"

"They must have respected that," the VP acknowledged.

"Exactly. They see Extreme Ownership in their leaders, and, as a result, they emulate Extreme Ownership throughout the chain of command down to the most junior personnel. As a group they

try to figure out how to fix their problems—instead of trying to figure out who or what to blame. For those on the outside looking in, like our training group—or the board in your case—the difference is obvious."

"And that is how I appear to the board right now—blaming everyone and everything else," the VP recognized.

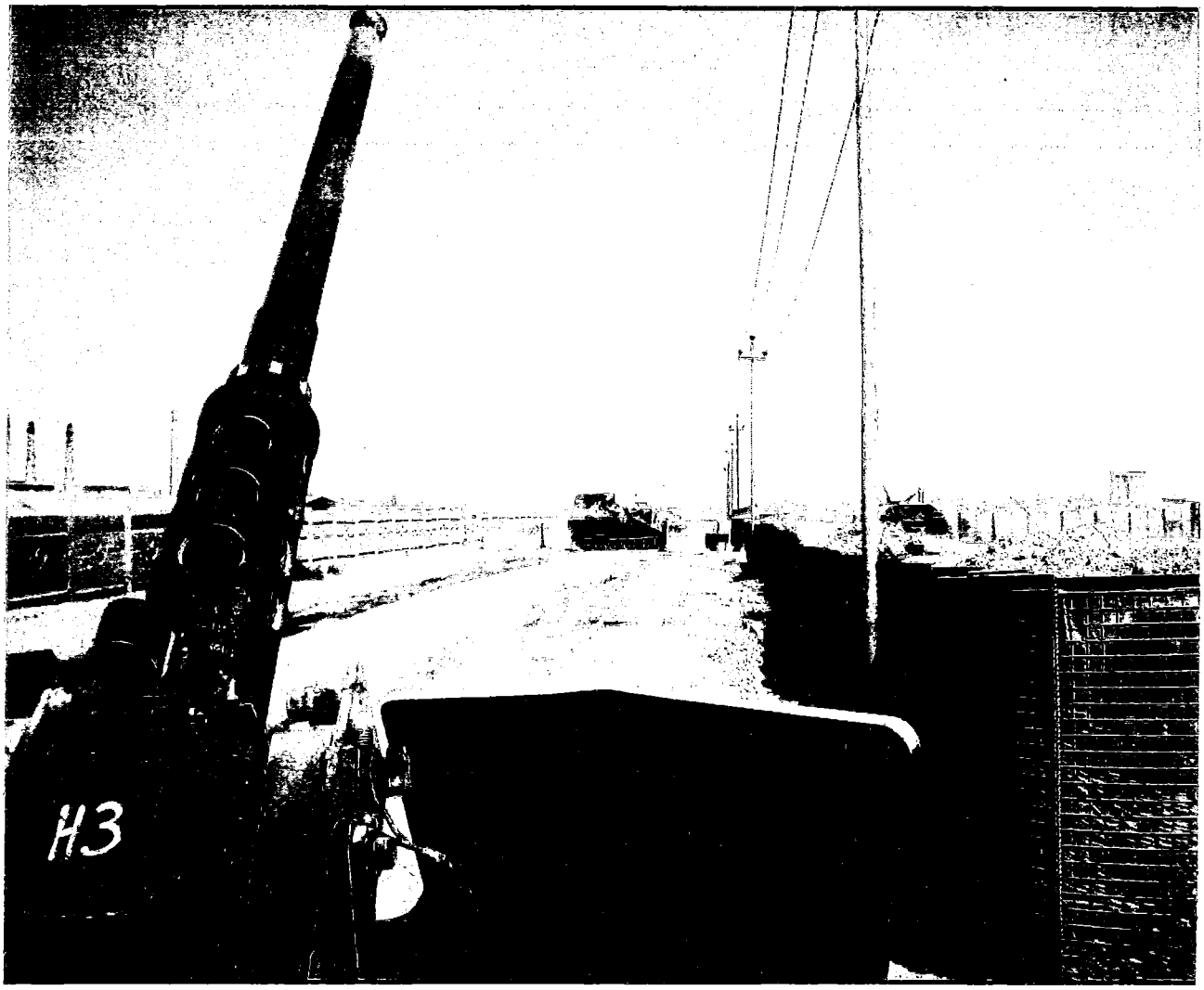
"There is only one way to fix it," I told him.

For the next several days, I helped the VP prepare for the board meeting. At times, he slipped back into defensiveness, not wanting to accept blame. He felt in many ways that his knowledge exceeded that of many members of the board—and he was probably right. But that didn't change the fact that he was the leader of a team that was failing its mission. As we rehearsed the VP's portion of the board presentation, I was unconvinced that he truly accepted total responsibility for his team's failures. I told him that bluntly.

"I'm saying exactly what you told me to say," the VP retorted. "The reason that this mission was unsuccessful was my failure as a leader to force execution."

"That's the problem," I said. "You are saying it, but I'm not convinced you believe it. Look at your career. You have accomplished amazing things. But you certainly aren't perfect. None of us are perfect. You are still learning and growing. We all are. And this is a lesson for you: if you reengage on this task, if you do a stern self-assessment of how you lead and what you can do better, the outcome will be different. But it starts here. It starts at the board meeting when you go in, put your ego aside, and take ownership for the company's failure here. The board members will be impressed with what they see and hear, because most people are unable to do this. They will respect your Extreme Ownership. Take personal responsibility for the failures. You *will* come out the other side stronger than ever before," I concluded.

At the board meeting, the VP did just that. He took the blame for the failure to meet the manufacturing objectives and gave a solid no-nonsense list of corrective measures that he would implement to ensure execution. The list started with what *he* was going to do differently, not about what other people needed to do. Now, the VP was on his way to Extreme Ownership.



"Let's get it on." A SEAL turret gunner looks across his M2 .50-caliber heavy machine gun out Ogden Gate into enemy territory beyond. The giant tank-track vehicle (M88 Recovery Vehicle) blocking the entrance to Camp Ramadi was used to deter the enemy's most devastating weapon—the car bomb or VBIED with several thousand pounds of explosives driven by a suicide bomber. Beyond the gate, the threat in the city was immense—and no one felt that more than the lead turret gunner in the first Humvee during a daytime mounted patrol.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

CHAPTER 2

No Bad Teams, Only Bad Leaders

Leif Babin

CORONADO, CALIFORNIA: BASIC UNDERWATER DEMOLITION/SEAL TRAINING

"It pays to be a winner!" shouted a much-feared blue-and-gold-shirted Navy SEAL instructor through the megaphone. It was night three into the infamous Hell Week of SEAL training. The students, in camouflage fatigues, were soaked to the bone and covered in gritty sand that chafed them until they were raw and bleeding. They shivered from the cold ocean water and cool wind of the Southern California night. The students moved with the aches and pains as only those who have suffered through seventy-two hours straight of nearly nonstop physical exertion can. Exhausted, over the previous three days they had slept for less than one hour total. Since Hell Week had begun, dozens of them had quit. Others had become sick or injured and were pulled from training. When this class had started Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training (known as BUD/S)—the SEAL basic training course—several weeks before, nearly two hundred determined young men had eagerly begun. All dreamed of

becoming a U.S. Navy SEAL, prepared for years, and came to BUD/S with every intention of graduating. And yet within the first forty-eight hours of Hell Week, most of those young men had surrendered to the brutal challenge, rung the bell three times—the signal for DOR, or drop on request—and walked away from their dream of becoming a SEAL. They had quit.

Hell Week was not a fitness test. While it did require some athletic ability, every student that survived the weeks of BUD/S training prior to Hell Week had already demonstrated adequate fitness to graduate. It was not a physical test but a mental one. Sometimes, the best athletes in the class didn't make it through Hell Week. Success resulted from determination and will, but also from innovation and communication with the team. Such training graduated men who were not only physically tough but who could also out-think their adversary.

Only a few years before, I had suffered through my own BUD/S class Hell Week on this very beach. We began our Hell Week with 101 students. When we finished only 40 of us remained. Some of the most gifted athletes in the class and loudest talking muscleheads had been first to quit. Those of us that had made it through realized we could push ourselves mentally and physically much further than most ever thought possible through the pain, misery, and exhaustion of days without sleep—precisely what Hell Week was designed to do.

Now I wore the blue-and-gold shirt of a SEAL instructor. Following two combat deployments to Iraq, I was assigned to our Naval Special Warfare Training Center to instruct the Junior Officer Training Course—our officer leadership program. In addition to my day job, I supported Hell Week as an instructor. As the officer in charge of this Hell Week shift, my job was to oversee the crew of BUD/S instructors who ran the training. The instructors were experts at their jobs of putting these students to

the test. They were especially skilled at weeding out those who don't have what it takes to become a SEAL. For me, to observe Hell Week from the instructor perspective was a whole new experience.

The BUD/S students were grouped into teams—"boat crews" of seven men, established by height. Each seven-man boat crew was assigned an IBS—inflatable boat, small. An IBS was small by U.S. Navy terms but awfully large and heavy when carried by hand. These large rubber boats, black with a painted yellow rim, weighed nearly two hundred pounds and became heavier still when filled with water and sand. A relic from the Navy Frogmen (Underwater Demolition Team) days of World War II, the dreaded boats had to be awkwardly carried everywhere, usually upon the heads of the seven boat-crew members struggling underneath. On land, the boat crews carried them up and over twenty-feet-high sand berms and ran with them for miles along the beach. They carried them on the hard asphalt streets back and forth across Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, trying like hell to keep up with instructors leading the way. The boat crews even pushed, pulled, squeezed, and muscled the unwieldy boats through the ropes and over the telephone poles and walls of the notorious BUD/S obstacle course. Out on the Pacific Ocean, the boat crews paddled their boats through the powerful crashing waves, often capsizing and scattering wet students and paddles across the beach like a storied shipwreck. These damned rubber boats were the source of a great deal of misery for the men assigned to them. Each boat had a roman numeral painted in bright yellow on the front, indicating the boat crew number—all except the boat crew made up of the shortest men in the class, known as the "Smurf crew." They had a bright blue Smurf painted on the bow of their boat.

In each boat crew the senior-ranking man served as boat crew

leader, responsible for receiving orders from the instructors and briefing, directing, and leading the other six members of the boat crew. The boat crew leader bore responsibility for the performance of his boat crew. And while each member of the boat crew had to perform, the boat crew leader—by his very position as leader—received the most scrutiny from the instructor staff.

During SEAL training (and really, throughout a SEAL's career) every evolution was a competition—a race, a fight, a contest. In BUD/S, this point was driven home by the SEAL instructors, who constantly reminded the students, "It pays to be a winner." When racing as a boat crew during Hell Week, the winning boat crew's prize for victory was to sit out the next race, earning a few brief minutes of respite from the grueling, nonstop physical evolutions. They weren't allowed to sleep, but just to sit down and rest were especially precious commodities. While it paid to be a winner, this rule had a corollary: it really sucked to be a loser. Second place, in the instructor's vernacular, was simply "the first loser." But bad performance—falling far behind the rest of the pack and coming in dead last—carried especially grueling penalties: unwanted attention from the SEAL instructors who dished out additional punishing exercises on top of the already exhausting Hell Week evolutions. Meanwhile, the victorious boat crew celebrated by sitting out the next race and, most important, not getting wet and cold for a few brief minutes.

The SEAL instructor cadre kept the students moving with constant boat crew races, giving detailed and intentionally complicated instructions to the boat crew leaders, who in turn briefed their men and executed the instructions as best they could in their exhausted state. The command went out from the SEAL instructor with the megaphone: "Boat crew leaders report!" The boat crew leaders left their boats and ran to take position, forming a smart line in front of the SEAL instructor, who laid out the specifics of the next race.

"Paddle your boats out through the surf zone, dump boat,* paddle your boats down to the next beach marker, then paddle them back into the beach, run up and over the berm and around the beach marker, then head-carry back to the rope station, then over the berm, and finish here," commanded the SEAL instructor. "Got it?"

The boat crew leaders raced back and briefed their boat crews. Then the race began. In place of the traditional "Ready, set, go," the SEAL command to begin was "Stand by . . . bust 'em!" And they were off.

In every race, there were standout performers. Throughout this particular Hell Week, one boat crew dominated the competition: Boat Crew II. They won or nearly won every single race. They pushed themselves hard every time, working in unison and operating as a team. Boat Crew II had a strong leader, and each of the individual boat crew members seemed highly motivated and performed well. They compensated for each other's weaknesses, helped each other, and took pride in winning, which had its rewards. After each victory, Boat Crew II enjoyed a few precious minutes of rest while the other boat crews toiled through the next race. Though Boat Crew II was still cold and exhausted, I saw smiles on most of their faces. They were performing exceptionally well; they were winning and morale was high.

Meanwhile, Boat Crew VI was delivering a standout performance of a different kind. They placed dead last in virtually every race, often lagging far behind the rest of the class. Rather than working together as a team, the men were operating as individuals, furious and frustrated at their teammates. We heard them yelling and cursing at each other from some distance, accusing the others of not doing their part. Each boat crew member focused

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* turn the boat upside down, get everybody into the water, then right the boat and get back in.

on his own individual pain and discomfort, and the boat crew leader was no exception. He certainly recognized they were underperforming, but likely, in his mind and that of his boat crew, no amount of effort could change that. And their horrific performance was the result.

"Boat Crew Six, you better start putting out!" blared a SEAL instructor through his megaphone. Extra attention from the instructor staff had serious consequences. Our SEAL instructors were all over Boat Crew VI, dishing out punishment for their poor performance. As a result, the misery multiplied tenfold for Boat Crew VI. They were forced to sprint back and forth over the sand berm, down to the water to get wet and sandy, then bear-crawl on blistered hands and feet. Next they had to hold the boat at "extended arm carry," with their arms fully extended overhead supporting the full weight of the IBS until their shoulders were completely smoked. This punishment sapped every ounce of remaining strength from the already weary and demoralized boat crew. The boat crew leader, a young and inexperienced officer, was getting even more attention. As the leader, he bore the responsibility for his boat crew's poor performance. Yet he seemed indifferent, as though fate had dealt him a poor hand: a team of underperformers who, no matter how hard he tried, simply could not get the job done.

I kept my eye on the leader of Boat Crew VI. If he did not show substantial improvement in leadership ability, he would not graduate from the program. SEAL officers were expected to perform like everyone else, but more important, they were also expected to lead. So far, Boat Crew VI's leader was demonstrating performance that was subpar and unacceptable. Our SEAL senior chief petty officer, the most experienced and highly respected noncommissioned officer of the SEAL instructor cadre, took a keen interest in Boat Crew VI and their lackluster leader.

"You had better take charge and square your boat away, Sir,"

said Senior Chief to the Boat Crew VI leader. Senior Chief was a goliath of a man, with piercing eyes that instilled fear equally into terrorists on the battlefield and students in training. An exceptional and revered leader himself, he had mentored many young junior officers. Now, Senior Chief offered an interesting solution to Boat Crew VI's atrocious performance.

"Let's swap out the boat crew leaders from the best and the worst crews and see what happens," said Senior Chief. All other controls would remain the same—heavy and awkward boats, manned by the same exhausted crews, cold water, gritty and chafing sand, wearied men competing in challenging races. Only a single individual, the leader, would change.

Could it possibly make any difference? I wondered.

The plan was quickly relayed to the other SEAL instructors. "Boat crew leaders from Boat Crews Two and Six report," blared the SEAL instructor through the megaphone. The two boat crew leaders ran over and stood at attention. "You two will swap positions and take charge of the other's boat crew. Boat Crew Six leader, you're now the leader of Boat Crew Two. Boat Crew Two Leader, you're now the leader of Boat Crew Six. Got it?" said the SEAL instructor.

The boat crew leader from Boat Crew II was clearly not happy. I'm sure he hated to leave the team he had built and knew well. No doubt he was proud of their dominant performance. The new assignment to take charge of a poorly performing boat crew would be difficult and could potentially invite unwanted attention from the SEAL instructors. Still, he dared not try to argue the point with the instructor. With no choice, he accepted the challenging assignment with a look of determination.

Boat Crew VI's leader was obviously elated. It was clear he felt that only by the luck of the draw—and no fault of his own—had he been assigned to the worst boat crew of underperformers. In his mind, no amount of effort on his part could make Boat Crew

VI better. Now, the SEAL instructor directed him to take over Boat Crew II. His face revealed his inner conviction that justice was finally being done and his new assignment meant things would now be easy for him.

Having received the direction to swap places, each boat crew leader went to his new position in the opposite boat crew and stood by for the next race. As before, boat crew leaders were given instructions, and they in turn briefed their teams.

"Stand by . . . bust 'em!" came the command. And they were off.

We watched the boat crews sprint over the berm carrying their boats, then hurry down to the surf zone and into the dark water. They jumped into their boats and paddled furiously. Passing through the crashing waves, they dumped boat, got everyone back on board, and then paddled down the beach. The headlights from our instructors' vehicles caught the reflection of the yellow bands painted around the boats' rims. We could no longer see the boat numbers. However, two boats were ahead of the pack, almost neck and neck, with one vying for the lead. A half mile down the beach, as the instructors' trucks followed, the boat crews paddled back into shore. As the boats came in on the headlights, the numbers were clearly visible. Boat Crew VI was in the lead and maintained first place all the way across the finish line, just ahead of Boat Crew II. Boat Crew VI had won the race.

A miraculous turnaround had taken place: Boat Crew VI had gone from last place to first. The boat crew members had begun to work together as a team, and *won*. Boat Crew II still performed well, though they narrowly lost the race. They continued to challenge Boat Crew VI for the lead in the follow-on races. And each of these boat crews outperformed all the rest, with Boat Crew VI winning most of the races over the better part of the next hour.

It was a shocking turn of events. Boat Crew VI, the same team

in the same circumstances only under new leadership, went from the worst boat crew in the class to the best. Gone was their cursing and frustration. And gone too was the constant scrutiny and individual attention they had received from the SEAL instructor staff. Had I not witnessed this amazing transformation, I might have doubted it. But it was a glaring, undeniable example of one of the most fundamental and important truths at the heart of Extreme Ownership: there are no bad teams, only bad leaders.

How is it possible that switching a single individual—only the leader—had completely turned around the performance of an entire group? The answer: leadership is the single greatest factor in any team's performance. Whether a team succeeds or fails is all up to the leader. The leader's attitude sets the tone for the entire team. The leader drives performance—or doesn't. And this applies not just to the most senior leader of an overall team, but to the junior leaders of teams within the team.

I reflected back to my own experience as a boat crew leader in BUD/S through the tribulations of Hell Week, where I had failed and should have done better and where I had succeeded. My boat crew at times had struggled to perform, until I figured out that I had to put myself in the most difficult position at the front of the boat and *lead*. That required driving the boat crew members hard, harder than they thought they could go. I discovered that it was far more effective to focus their efforts not on the days to come or the far-distant finish line they couldn't yet see, but instead on a physical goal immediately in front of them—the beach marker, landmark, or road sign a hundred yards ahead. If we could execute with a monumental effort just to reach an immediate goal that everyone could see, we could then continue to the next visually attainable goal and then the next. When pieced together, it meant our performance over time increased substantially and eventually we crossed the finish line at the head of the pack.

Looking back, I could have yelled a lot less and encouraged more. As a boat crew leader, I protected my boat crew from the instructor staff as much as I could. It was "us versus them," as I saw it. In protecting my boat crew, I actually sheltered a couple of perpetual underperformers who dragged the rest of the boat crew down. When Hell Week was over, talking to some of the other members of our boat crew, we realized we had carried along these mentally weak performers. They almost certainly would not have met the standards otherwise. That loyalty was misguided. If we wouldn't want to serve alongside our boat crew's weakest performers once we were all assigned to SEAL platoons in various SEAL Teams, we had no right to force other SEALs to do so. The instructors were tasked with weeding out those without the determination and will to meet the high standards of performance. We had hindered that.

Ultimately, how my boat crew performed was entirely on me. The concept that there were no bad teams, only bad leaders was a difficult one to accept but nevertheless a crucial concept that leaders must fully understand and implement to enable them to most effectively lead a high-performance team. Leaders must accept total responsibility, own problems that inhibit performance, and develop solutions to those problems. A team could only deliver exceptional performance if a leader ensured the team worked together toward a focused goal and enforced high standards of performance, working to continuously improve. With a culture of Extreme Ownership within the team, every member of the team could contribute to this effort and ensure the highest levels of performance.

Watching these events now unfold as a BUD/S instructor, I knew that as difficult a challenge as Hell Week was for these students, it was only training. These young boat crew leaders could not fully comprehend the burden of leadership for which they would

soon be responsible as SEAL officers on the battlefield. As combat leaders, the pressure on them would be immense, beyond their imagination.

Only months before this very Hell Week, I had been a SEAL platoon commander in Ramadi, Iraq, leading combat missions into the most violent, enemy-held areas of the city. We'd been in more firefights than I could count, against a well-armed, experienced, and highly determined enemy. Death lurked around the corner at any moment. Every decision I (and the leaders within our platoon and task unit) made carried potentially mortal consequences. We had delivered a huge impact on the battlefield, killed hundreds of insurgents, and protected U.S. Soldiers and Marines. I was proud of those triumphs. But we had also suffered immense tragedy with the loss of the first Navy SEAL killed in combat in Iraq, Marc Lee. Marc was an incredible teammate, an exceptional SEAL warrior with an amazing sense of humor that kept us laughing through the darkest of times. He was shot and killed in the midst of a furious firefight in one of the largest single battles fought by U.S. forces in South-Central Ramadi. Marc was my friend and brother. I was his commander, ultimately responsible for his life. Yet I had received only a minor gunshot wound that day, while Marc was struck and killed instantly. I had come home and he had not. This was devastating beyond measure.

I grieved too for Mike Monsoor, from Task Unit Bruiser's Delta Platoon, who, while not a member of my platoon, was also a friend and brother. Mike had jumped on a grenade to save three of his teammates. Mike was loved and respected by all who knew him. Like Marc, we deeply mourned his loss.

On the same day Marc Lee had been killed, another beloved SEAL from Charlie Platoon, Ryan Job, had been shot in the face by an enemy sniper. He was gravely wounded and we weren't sure he would live. Yet Ryan, tough as nails, had survived, although his wound left him permanently blind. Still, Ryan's drive

and determination were unstoppable. He married the girl of his dreams and, after medically retiring from the Navy, enrolled in a college program and earned a business degree, graduating with a 4.0 GPA. Despite being blind, Ryan successfully reached the 14,410-foot summit of Mount Rainier and personally bagged a trophy bull elk (using a rifle fitted with a specially designed scope with a camera for a spotter).* Ryan was an exceptional SEAL, a wonderful teammate and a friend who inspired all who knew him. Though he had as much right as anyone to be bitter about the hand life dealt him, he was not. We laughed continuously every time we got together. Ryan and his wife were expecting their first child, and he could hardly contain his excitement. But just when I thought that the men of Charlie Platoon and Task Unit Bruiser and their families who had suffered and endured so much were safe from the specter of death, Ryan Job died in recovery from a surgery to repair his combat wounds—wounds he had received under my charge. No words can fully describe the hammer blow that this news dealt—agony beyond comprehension.

As their platoon commander, the loss of Marc and Ryan were a crushing burden that I would bear for the rest of my days. I knew that Mike's platoon commander in Delta Platoon felt the same way. And, as commander of Task Unit Bruiser, Jocko carried this burden for all. And yet as difficult as this was for me, I knew I could not ever fully understand how devastating the loss of these fine men was to their families and closest friends. In the months and years ahead, it was my duty to help them and support them as best I could.

As I stood watching these young boat crew leaders—not yet SEALs—I knew they could not possibly grasp the responsibilities

* Ryan was afforded these opportunities at spectacular outdoor adventures through the amazing work of Camp Patriot (www.camppatriot.org), a nonprofit organization for wounded veterans.

in store for them as future SEAL officers and combat leaders. Sure, BUD/S training was tough. Hell Week was a kick in the nuts. But nobody was striving to kill them. Decisions in training here weren't life or death. Boat Crew races did not lead to memorial services. There was no pressure that wrong decisions might spark an international incident, which could instantly make the evening news or front-page newspaper headlines, with negative repercussions on the entire war effort, just as it had been for us in Iraq.

When these inexperienced soon-to-be SEAL officers graduated from BUD/S, I put them through our five-week-long Junior Officer Training Course, a program focused on their leadership development. I did my utmost to pass onto them everything I wish someone had taught me prior to leading in combat. In the final weeks of each course, we ran the Marc Lee and Mike Monsoor Memorial Run, a five-mile, uphill course that climbed to the top of the huge cliffs of Point Loma and finished at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, where both Marc and Mike are buried. In that serene setting overlooking the Pacific Ocean, most fitting for these two noble warriors, I gathered the class of junior officers around the headstones and told them about Marc and Mike. To me, it was deeply important to tell their stories so that the legacies of Marc Lee and Mike Monsoor could carry on. It also served as a stark realization to these future SEAL combat leaders of just how immense their responsibilities were and how deadly serious the burden of command.

As they went forth to serve as officers and leaders in SEAL platoons and beyond, all responsibility and accountability rested on their shoulders. If their platoons underperformed, it was up to them to solve problems, overcome obstacles and get the team working together to accomplish the mission. Ultimately, they must fully accept that there truly are no bad teams, only bad leaders.

PRINCIPLE

About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior, by Colonel David Hackworth, U.S. Army (Retired) influenced many frontline leaders in the SEAL Teams and throughout the military. The lengthy memoir details Colonel Hackworth's military career, combat experiences in Korea and Vietnam, and his myriad of leadership lessons learned. Although a controversial figure later in life, Hackworth was an exceptional and highly respected battlefield leader. In the book, Hackworth relates the philosophy of his U.S. Army mentors who fought and defeated the Germans and Japanese in World War II: "There are no bad units, only bad officers."* This captures the essence of what Extreme Ownership is all about. This is a difficult and humbling concept for any leader to accept. But it is an essential mind-set to building a high-performance, winning team.

When leaders who epitomize Extreme Ownership drive their teams to achieve a higher standard of performance, they must recognize that when it comes to standards, as a leader, *it's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate.* When setting expectations, no matter what has been said or written, if substandard performance is accepted and no one is held accountable—if there are no consequences—that poor performance becomes the new standard. Therefore, leaders must enforce standards. Consequences for failing need not be immediately severe, but leaders must ensure that tasks are repeated until the higher expected standard is achieved. Leaders must push the standards in a way that encourages and enables the team to utilize Extreme Ownership.

The leader must pull the different elements within the team

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* *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior,* by Colonel David Hackworth, U.S. Army (Retired) and Julie Sherman.

together to support one another, with all focused exclusively on how to best accomplish the mission. One lesson from the BUD/S boat crew leader example above is that most people, like Boat Crew VI, want to be part of a winning team. Yet, they often don't know how, or simply need motivation and encouragement. Teams need a forcing function to get the different members working together to accomplish the mission and that is what leadership is all about.

Once a culture of Extreme Ownership is built into the team at every level, the entire team performs well, and performance continues to improve, even when a strong leader is temporarily removed from the team. On the battlefield, preparation for potential casualties plays a critical role in a team's success, if a key leader should go down. But life can throw any number of circumstances in the way of any business or team, and every team must have junior leaders ready to step up and temporarily take on the roles and responsibilities of their immediate bosses to carry on the team's mission and get the job done if and when the need arises.

Leaders should never be satisfied. They must always strive to improve, and they must build that mind-set into the team. They must face the facts through a realistic, brutally honest assessment of themselves and their team's performance. Identifying weaknesses, good leaders seek to strengthen them and come up with a plan to overcome challenges. The best teams anywhere, like the SEAL Teams, are constantly looking to improve, add capability, and push the standards higher. It starts with the individual and spreads to each of the team members until this becomes the culture, the new standard. The recognition that there are *no bad teams, only bad leaders* facilitates Extreme Ownership and enables leaders to build high-performance teams that dominate on any battlefield, literal or figurative.

APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

"I love this concept of Extreme Ownership," the CEO said. "We could really use some at my company. We have a fairly solid team, but I have some key leaders that lack Extreme Ownership. I'd like to bring you in to work with us."

The CEO and founder of a financial services company had observed a presentation I gave to a group of senior corporate executives. Intrigued by the concept of Extreme Ownership, he had approached me afterward to engage in conversation.

"Happy to help," I replied.

To better understand the dynamics of his team and the particular challenges of his company and industry, I spent some time with the CEO in discussions via phone, visited his company offices, and met with his leadership team. I then conducted a leadership program for the company's department heads and key leaders.

The CEO opened the program and introduced me to those in the room, explaining why he had invested in this training.

"We aren't winning," the CEO stated plainly. A new product rollout the company had recently launched had not gone well, and the company's books were in the red. Now the company stood at a pivotal junction. "We need to take on these concepts like Extreme Ownership, which Leif is going to talk to you about today, so that we can get back on track and win." The CEO then left the room all to me, his senior managers, and department heads.

After presenting some background on my combat experience and how the principle of Extreme Ownership was critical to the success of any team, I engaged the department heads and managers in discussion.

"How can you apply Extreme Ownership to your teams to succeed and help your company win?" I asked.

One of the company's key department leaders, the chief technology officer (CTO), who built the company's signature products, exhibited a defensive demeanor. He was not a fan of Extreme Ownership. I quickly recognized why. Since the new product line had been his baby, taking ownership of the disastrous rollout was humbling and difficult. The CTO was full of excuses for why his team had failed and for the resulting damage to the company's bottom line. He shamelessly blamed the failed new-product rollout on a challenging market, an industry in flux, inexperienced personnel within his team, poor communication with the sales force, and lackluster customer service. He also blamed the company's senior executive team. The CTO refused to take ownership of mistakes or acknowledge that his team could perform better, though the CEO had made it clear they must all improve or the company might fold.

I told the BUD/S boat crew leader story to the group, how Boat Crew VI turned their performance around under new leadership, and I outlined the concept that there are no bad teams, only bad leaders.

"During my own training and performance in BUD/S as a boat crew leader," I told them, "I can remember many times when my boat crew struggled. It was easy to make excuses for our team's performance and why it wasn't what it should have been. But I learned that good leaders don't make excuses. Instead, they figure out a way to get it done and win."

"What was the difference between the two leaders in the boat crew leader example?" asked one of the managers, in charge of a critical team within the company.

"When Boat Crew Six was failing under their original leader," I answered, "that leader didn't seem to think it was possible for them to perform any better, and he certainly didn't think they could win. This negative attitude infected his entire boat crew.

As is common in teams that are struggling, the original leader of Boat Crew Six almost certainly justified his team's poor performance with any number of excuses. In his mind, the other boat crews were outperforming his own only because those leaders had been lucky enough to be assigned better crews. His attitude reflected victimization: life dealt him and his boat crew members a disadvantage, which justified poor performance. As a result, his attitude prevented his team from looking inwardly at themselves and where they could improve. Finally, the leader and each member of Boat Crew Six focused not on the mission but on themselves, their own exhaustion, misery, and individual pain and suffering. Though the instructors demanded that they do better, Boat Crew Six had become comfortable with substandard performance. Working under poor leadership and an unending cycle of blame, the team constantly failed. No one took ownership, assumed responsibility, or adopted a winning attitude."

"What did the new boat crew leader do differently?" asked another of the department heads.

"When the leader of Boat Crew Two took charge of Boat Crew Six, he exhibited Extreme Ownership to the fullest," I explained. "He faced the facts: he recognized and accepted that Boat Crew Six's performance was terrible, that they were losing and had to get better. He didn't blame anyone, nor did he make excuses to justify poor performance. He didn't wait for others to solve his boat crew's problems. His realistic assessment, acknowledgment of failure, and *ownership* of the problem were key to developing a plan to improve performance and ultimately win. Most important of all, *he believed winning was possible.* In a boat crew where winning seemed so far beyond reach, the belief that the team actually could improve and win was essential."

I continued: "The new leader of Boat Crew Six focused his team on the mission. Rather than tolerate their bickering and

infighting, he pulled the team together and focused their collective efforts on the single specific goal of winning the race. He established a new and higher standard of performance and accepted nothing less from the men in his boat crew."

"Why do you think Boat Crew Two, which had lost its strong leader, continued to perform well, even with the far less capable leader from Boat Crew Six?" asked another department leader.

"Extreme Ownership—good leadership—is contagious," I answered. "Boat Crew Two's original leader had instilled a *culture* of Extreme Ownership, of winning and how to win, in every individual. Boat Crew Two had developed into a solid team of high-performing individuals. Each member demanded the highest performance from the others. Repetitive exceptional performance became a habit. Each individual knew what they needed to do to win and did it. They no longer needed explicit direction from a leader. As a result, Boat Crew Two continued to outperform virtually every other boat crew and vied with Boat Crew Six for first place in nearly every race."

I detailed how the original leader of Boat Crew VI joined Boat Crew II thinking life would be easy for him. Instead, he had to seriously step up his game to keep up with such a high-performance team. For him, the greatest lesson of that day was learned: he witnessed a complete turnaround in the performance of his former team as he watched a new leader demonstrate that what seemed impossible was achievable through good leadership. Though he had failed to lead effectively to that point, the original leader of Boat Crew VI learned and implemented that humbling lesson. Ultimately, he graduated from BUD/S training and had a successful career in the SEAL Teams.

"In summary," I told them, "whether or not your team succeeds or fails is all on you. Extreme Ownership is a concept to help you make the right decisions as a key leader so that you can win."

The chief technology officer bristled. "We *are* making the right decisions," he said. He was serious.

Surprised at his statement, I responded, "You've all admitted that as a company you aren't winning."

"We may not be winning," said the CTO resolutely, "but we're making the right decisions."

"If you aren't winning," I responded, "then you aren't making the right decisions." The CTO was so sure he was right, so content to make excuses and shift blame for his own mistakes and failures, that he made ludicrous claims to avoid taking any ownership or responsibility.

Just like the original boat crew leader in Boat Crew VI, this CTO exhibited the opposite of Extreme Ownership. He took no meaningful action to improve his performance or push his team to improve. Worse, he refused to admit that his own performance was subpar and that he and his team could do better. His CEO had stated plainly that the company's performance must improve substantially. But the CTO was stuck in a cycle of blaming others and refused to take ownership or responsibility. He had become what a good friend from my own BUD/S class and SEAL qualification training dubbed the "Tortured Genius." By this, he did not mean the artist or musician who suffers from mental health issues, but in the context of ownership. No matter how obvious his or her failing, or how valid the criticism, a Tortured Genius, in this sense, accepts zero responsibility for mistakes, makes excuses, and blames everyone else for their failings (and those of their team). In their mind, the rest of the world just can't see or appreciate the genius in what they are doing. An individual with a Tortured Genius mind-set can have catastrophic impact on a team's performance.

After lengthy discussion with the department heads and managers, many of them came to understand and appreciate Extreme

Ownership. But not the CTO. After the workshop concluded, I met with the company's CEO to debrief.

"How did things go?" he asked.

"The workshop went well. Most of your department heads and key leaders took on board this concept of Extreme Ownership," I replied. "You have one major issue, though."

"Let me guess," replied the CEO. "My chief technology officer."

"Affirmative," I responded. "He resisted the concept of Extreme Ownership at every turn." I had seen this before, both in the SEAL Teams and with other client companies. In any group, there was always a small number of people who wanted to shirk responsibility. But this CTO was a particularly serious case.

"Your CTO might be one of the worst 'Tortured Geniuses' I have seen," I said.

The CEO acknowledged that his CTO was a problem, that he was difficult to work with and other department leaders in the company had major issues with him. But the CEO felt that because the CTO's experience level and knowledge were critical to the company, he couldn't possibly fire him. It also seemed the CTO felt he was above reproach.

"I can't tell you to fire anyone," I responded. "Those are decisions only you can make. But what I can tell you is this: when it comes to performance standards, *It's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate.* You have to drive your CTO to exercise Extreme Ownership—to acknowledge mistakes, stop blaming others, and lead his team to success. If you allow the status quo to persist, you can't expect to improve performance, and you can't expect to win."

A week later, I followed up with a phone call to the CEO to see how his team was doing.

"Some folks are really embracing this concept of Extreme Ownership," he said enthusiastically. "But the chief technology

officer continues to be a problem." The CEO related how, upon my departure, the CTO had barged into his office and warned that the concept of Extreme Ownership had "negative repercussions." This was laughable.

"There are no negative repercussions to Extreme Ownership," I said. "There are only two types of leaders: effective and ineffective. Effective leaders that lead successful, high-performance teams exhibit Extreme Ownership. Anything else is simply ineffective. Anything else is *bad leadership*."

The CTO's performance and the performance of his team illustrated this in Technicolor. His abrasiveness affected his entire team and other departments in the company that had difficulty working with him. The CEO understood. His company wasn't winning, and he cared too much about the company he had built and the livelihood of his other employees to allow the company to fail. They must do better.

He let the CTO go.

A new CTO came on board with a different attitude—a mindset of Extreme Ownership.

With this change in the leadership of the company's technology team, other departments began to work together with success, and that teamwork played a key role as the company rebounded. Once failing and struggling to survive, the company was now back on a path toward profitability and growth. Their success illustrated once again that leadership is the most important thing on any battlefield; it is the single greatest factor in whether a team succeeds or fails. A leader must find a way to become effective and drive high performance within his or her team in order to win. Whether in SEAL training, in combat on distant battlefields, in business, or in life: there are no bad teams, only bad leaders.

Iraqi soldiers help a wounded comrade away from danger during a firefight in the Ma'laab District of Ramadi on a joint operation with U.S. Soldiers, Marines, and SEALs of Task Unit Bruiser.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)